

## REVIEW

A NEW STUDY OF *THE LIFE OF AUGUSTUS* OF  
NICOLAUS OF DAMASCUS

Christophe Burgeon, *La Vie d'Auguste de Nicolas de Damas*. Giornale italiano di Filologia, Bibliotheca 30. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2022. Pp. 179. Paperback, €55.00. ISBN 978-2-503-60047-5.

Classical philologists and modern historians specialising in the political history of the waning years of the Roman Republic, the period Sir Ronald Syme described as ‘revolutionary’ (44 to 27 BC), have not been kind to Nicolaus of Damascus. Only in the last few decades has this author or, at the very least, his main work that can be read as a cohesive whole, received the attention it deserves. The work in question is the *Βίος Καίσαρος* or *Life of Caesar*, which many, including myself, have improperly rendered as the *Life of Augustus*, in a bid to prevent the uninitiated from confusing (Julius) Caesar with Octavius, the dictator’s political heir, who took on the name of *Καίσαρ* after the former’s death. Thus, Nicolaus uses the name *Καίσαρ* to refer to the young Octavius before he was awarded the name Augustus by the Roman Senate which, in a crucial moment, granted him the *imperium pro consulare* in its meeting of 13 January 27 BC and, a few days later, on the sixteenth, granted him the official title of *Imperator Caesar Divi filius Augustus*. Thus, ‘Octavianus’ was never an official name,<sup>1</sup> and the practice of calling him Octavianus or Octavian, which is especially common in modern and, specifically, Italian historiography, should be done away with altogether. Burgeon refers to him as ‘Octavien’. However, according to a strict application of historical methodology, the most correct option would be to call him ‘Octavius’ (or ‘Octave’ in French) or ‘Gaius Octavius’ (Γάϊος Ὀκτάουϊος) up until the first week of April 43 BC, to call him ‘Caesar [*Caesar Caes. filius*]’, or simply ‘Caesar’ (*Καίσαρ*), his official name, from 8 May 44 to 16 January 27; and to call him ‘Caesar Augustus’, or simply ‘Augustus’,<sup>2</sup> from that point onward. Burgeon devotes

<sup>1</sup> Kienast (1996) 61.

<sup>2</sup> On onomastic adoption, see: App. *BC* 3.11.38; Cic. *Att.* 14.1.2; Suet. *Aug.* 7.2; Dio 45.3. This subject has been studied by Syme (1958); Kienast (1996) 61; Rubincam (1992); Wallace-Hadrill (2016); Savino (2016); Perea-Yébenes (2017a) 76.

several pages to explain ‘Quand Octave devint Octavien’ (123–33), which is, in fact, a description of the political situation young Octavius was faced with during the two years following Caesar’s death, when he decided to accept the dictator’s ‘political’ inheritance by adopting his name. His travels through Italy from the moment of his arrival in Brundisium are described according to Nicolaus’ account.

Let us move on to the book itself. Its title may prove confusing, as the work is not a translation of the *Life of Augustus*, but rather a historical commentary on it. Even though this book was published in a series on philological studies of the Università degli Studi di Perugia, precious little space is devoted to philology, not least due to the fact that neither the Greek text of the Βίος Καίσαρος nor a modern version or translation are provided to the reader. This requires the reader to have a bilingual edition of the Βίος on hand to see if Bourgeon’s opinions are *truly and faithfully* based on the original text by Nicolaus. The author constantly refers to the Greek edition of the Βίος by Felix Jacoby, eschewing other, more recent bilingual editions.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the author’s failure to present a modern version of the text is a significant obstacle for readers who lack access to Jacoby’s rare Greek edition.

In the Introduction (7–11), the author provides a brief description of the life and preserved works of Nicolaus and their main manuscripts. In doing so, he points out the obvious by stating that the work in question is, in fact, an *elogium* of Octavius, the subject of the biography, as a ‘literary’ model of a good ruler, alongside the story of his rise to power. The fact that it is written in Greek suggests that it was meant to be read in the eastern provinces, just as Augustus’ own autobiography, written in Latin, was meant for western readers, especially in the city of Rome. This work, known as the *De vita sua*, or Ὑπομνήματα (*Memoir* or *Commentaries*),<sup>4</sup> survives to us in twenty-eight fragments or citations with translations of the texts.<sup>5</sup> The work must have originally been made up of thirteen books, according to Suetonius, *Aug.* 85, *multa varii generis prosa oratione composuit ... et aliqua ‘De vita sua’, quam tredecim libris Cantabrico tenus bello nec ultra exposuit* (‘[Augustus] wrote many works in various genres of prose [...] and a certain work *On His Own Life*, which he set out in thirteen books down to the Cantabrian war and no further’). It is unclear whether Suetonius had access to this work or if it was already lost at the time, as he does not refer to it explicitly anywhere in his biography of Augustus. Bourgeon’s discussion of this work (48–52), as with modern authors generally, assumes that the date must

<sup>3</sup> Jacoby (1925–6) II.1.324–430 (text) and II.2.229–91 (commentary).

<sup>4</sup> On the style of the ones written by Sulla, Plut. *Sulla*, 14.6.4. Appian (*BC* 4.110) mentions Augustus’ Ὑπομνήματα.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Perea-Yébenes (2006) 231–43.

have been 25 BC: 'La date précise de composition est inconnue, mais elle devait se situer peu de temps après la fin de la guerre de Cantabrie, en 25 avant J.-C.' (48–9). The problem with this statement is that the Cantabrian wars did not end in 25 BC, but rather in 19 BC, under the leadership of Agrippa. However, 25 BC is a likely date due to the fact that it was the last year in which Augustus was present on the front line before withdrawing to the provincial capital of Tarraco, and thence to Rome where, in a deceitful act of political propaganda, he proclaimed the 'end of the war' in order to be able to hold a *triumphus*. On the other hand, the fact that *De vita sua* was dedicated to his friends Maecenas and Agrippa (Plut. *Comp. Dem.–Cic.* 3.1: ὡς αὐτὸς ὁ Καίσαρ ἐν τοῖς πρὸς Ἀγρίππαν καὶ Μαϊκῆναν ὑπομνήμασιν εἶρηκεν), suggests that the latter had put an end to the *Bellum Cantabricum*, and that the work may have been written until as late as 19 BC. In any event, this theory is unfalsifiable, as Nicolaus' work on Octavius–Augustus does not cover the decade between 29 and 19 BC, and Augustus' work may have been lost at an early date. These memoirs may have influenced the first part of the *Bíos*, which covers the childhood and adolescence of the future emperor. We know, despite Augustus' attempts to portray himself as a writer throughout his life, this work could hardly be described as a masterpiece.<sup>6</sup>

Burgeon (59–75) provides an interesting depiction of the turbulent political life of Rome described in the second part of the *Bíos*, which produced more literature than has survived to this day. Let it suffice to mention the lost biography of Caesar by C. Oppius (Burgeon, 67–8), the *Histories* by Asinius Pollio, and the problems surrounding the authorship of the so-called Caesarian Corpus. One truly important question is whether the *Bíos Καίσαρος* is a 'historical' work or a mere literary biography that should be used with caution as a historical source, much like the late Roman panegyrics. We have suggested that one of the purposes of the *Bíos Καίσαρος* is to highlight the importance of education for young people, especially those who would pursue a career in politics. Nicolaus was not only a historian, philosopher, and diplomat, but also a teacher. Augustus and Nicolaus were contemporaries, the former having been born in 63 BC and the latter one year earlier and, even though they met and became friends of sorts, their relationship was not of a pedagogical, but rather political and diplomatic nature. Indeed, Nicolaus acted as the ambassador and guarantor in Rome for the fulfilment of the testament of king Herod the Great, to whom he had been an advisor, as we learn from Nicolaus' own *Autobiography*.

His work as a diplomat and his personal knowledge of Augustus, perhaps after having read the emperor's autobiography in Augustus' own residence,

<sup>6</sup> Perea-Yébenes (2017b).

may have given rise to the idea of penning the *Bíos Kaίσαρος*, which we date to the last years of Nicolaus' life. What might have compelled Nicolaus to write this work? There are many possible reasons, but we would like to point out two. The first one would be as a literary exercise in historical biography, which could be presented as the conclusion to his *Universal History*, in 144 books according to Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 6.54) and in eighty volumes according to the *Suda*, of which fragments of several books have survived. A second reason that may have led Nicolaus to write this biography may have been to improve on Augustus' own *De vita sua*, portraying him from a biographical, rather than autobiographical point of view. Thus, Nicolaus insists on the need for young people to obtain a good education for political life, devoting much space to the teenage years and intellectual training of young Octavius, whom he portrays as the ideal role model. It is worth keeping in mind that Nicolaus was a Peripatetic philosopher (a work by Nicolaus with commentaries on Aristotle has survived in Syriac and Arabic),<sup>7</sup> and we must therefore keep the notion of the 'philosopher-teacher' in mind, perhaps along the lines of Aristotle as the teacher of young Alexander, prince of Macedon. It is also worth mentioning that the *Suda* (N 393) refers to the *Bíos Kaίσαρος* as a pedagogical text: <Νικόλαος,> Δαμασκηνός, γνώριμος ... Αύγούστου Καίσαρος, φιλόσοφος Περιπατητικός ... ἔγραψεν Ἱστορίαν καθολικὴν ἐν βιβλίῳ π', καὶ τοῦ βίου Καίσαρος ἀγωγήν ('[Nicolaus] of Damascus, an acquaintance [...] of Caesar Augustus, Peripatetic philosopher. Wrote a *Universal History* in eighty books and an educational work on the life of Caesar'). Nicolaus' praise of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (*History*, 1.1.3–6), another pedagogical work that covers, as its title indicates, the education of young prince Cyrus, also follows in the same vein. In this regard, I agree with Burgeon (25–6) when he points out Nicolaus of Damascus' humane values, which he expresses in the *Bíos* and which he may have continued to cultivate in his private conversations with Augustus in Rome. Nicolaus' life seems to have been governed by a humanistic, moralising, and scientific spirit, insofar as it was able to apply the knowledge of *physis* to human psychology (82).

This book is divided into two clearly differentiated and complementary parts. The first one (7–82) is devoted to the life and works of the author. This multifaceted Syrian intellectual from Damascus pursued a career in diplomacy during Herod the Great's reign of approximately thirty years, acting as a political advisor and as an ambassador, as we know from Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*. It was during this period that he met the Roman imperial family when ladies of the house of Augustus, such as Julia Augusta in 14 BC, travelled

<sup>7</sup> Drossaart Lulofs (1969).

to the East.<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that, as far as we know, Nicolaus never wrote about Jewish religious matters, nor did he follow that religion, despite his long stay in the court of Herod the Great. His Hellenistic education prevailed against all other influences. Any parallels that have been found between the works of Nicolaus and those of Rabbi Hillel are strained, few in number, and largely insignificant (cf. Burgeon, 25).

Burgeon provides a very well written review of Nicolaus' biography based on the texts compiled by Jacoby and expands on the texts in various ancient sources concerning his life. As we pointed out earlier, Nicolaus was a multi-faceted and very active man. Only a few of the many philosophical works he penned have survived, which seem to follow Aristotle or, rather Theophrastus, Aristotle's successor in the Lyceum.

The author approaches the discussion on the date on which the *Bíos* was drafted (35–7) by providing an exposition of the various opinions of modern authors, analysing the chronology of the preserved ending and other historical factors. The most widely accepted date is 25–20 BC, but I believe that this date must be moved at least five or six years later, to the time when Nicolaus truly came into contact with the Roman imperial family, towards 14 BC. The fact that the text of the *Bíos* does not describe the last years (roughly between 24 and 14 BC) may be due to other factors, such as the fact that this part was never written or that the Byzantine scribe who copied the text that has survived (*Codex Turonensis* C 980, with the *Excerpta de Virtutibus et Vitiis*, compiled by Constantine Porphyrogenitus, in the tenth century) did not have access to the complete original text.

The second part of the book is a broad historical commentary on Nicolaus' *Bíos Kaίσαρος*. Unlike other editions in which authors have added extensive footnotes to Nicolaus' text, following the original order, Burgeon, in what constitutes this book's most innovative and valuable contribution, provides a *thematic* reading that both integrates and breaks down the text. Thus, he arranges the text for the purpose of describing the main subjects of the work and those which he deems to be most important: 'L'ascendance et la jeunesse d'Auguste' (85–90), 'L'éducation d'Octave' (90–7), 'La personnalité d'Octave' (97–102), 'Octave et César' (102–11), 'La mort de César' (112–22), 'Quand Octave devint Octavien' (123–33), 'Octavien et Cicéron' (133–8), 'Octavien et Marc Antoine' (138–48). This is followed by a conclusion to the second part and a general conclusion for the entire book, a bibliography, and a number of very complete indexes. Most of these pages complement the author's statements in the first part of the book. The subjects covered in the second part are important owing to the relevance of their protagonists: Julius Caesar, young

<sup>8</sup> Perea-Yébenes (2012).

Octavius–Caesar, Cicero, Mark Antony, who were at the heart of the revolutionary, conflictive waning years of the Roman Republic that gave rise to a new political order in Rome. All these chapters touch on specific historical facts and issues that are relevant to specialised research and, perhaps to a lesser extent, to popular history.

This book stands out due to its analysis and reconsideration of this historical period in the light of the information provided by Nicolaus of Damascus in his *Bίος Καίσαρος* which, as we pointed out earlier, is extremely close to the events described and to the sources of information, even though it lacks the objectivity that would be required from a modern historian. Burgeon's book is extremely well documented in classical sources.

Despite the few flaws we have pointed out and the lack of a number of bibliographical references,<sup>9</sup> this remains an extremely useful book, especially for researchers looking for specific alternative explanations on certain aspects mentioned by Nicolaus, whose work is an invaluable source for the period it covers. Any attempt to raise awareness about the works of Nicolaus is worthy of praise, and we would therefore like to congratulate the author for his work.

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<sup>9</sup> Several works have been indicated that the author could have consulted profitably. But there are more still. The absence of the book by K. Czajkowski and B. Eckhardt (2021), where he studies in depth the friendship relationship between the king of Judea, Herod, of whom Nicolaus is ambassador, and Rome, could be explained, perhaps, by the date of appearance of this book and the date of writing of the present Burgeon book. This *amicitia* explains Nicolaus' interest in Roman history and in particular in the life of Augustus, whose personal friendship he cultivated. Burgeon cites some of my work on Nicolaus, but not all. He ignores, for example, my 2006 book cited above and other easily accessible research. Thus, the relations of Julius Caesar with the young Octavius in the year 45 in Hispania (ND *Bίος Καίσαρος*, 23–7) are analysed in Perea-Yébenes (2005), (2015), and (2017a). Caesar died in the year 44 BC (an event that occupies a large part of ND's work) the young Octavius travels to Italy to accept Caesar's inheritance (Perea-Yébenes (2015)). A good argument to propose that the *Bίος* was written after the year 25 BC (the date on which Augustus concludes his *Vita*) is that Nicolaus began to have direct contact with Augustus' family in the year 14 BC, when Julia, the emperor's daughter and Agrippa's wife, travelled to the Greek provinces as tourists. They were accompanied by Nicolaus on this trip, at which time he, in the presence of the imperial family, carried out diplomatic and legal arbitration missions in Ilium. The episode is well known by combining the text of Nicolaus (*FGrHist* 90 F 134) with the information provided by Josephus (*Ant. Iud.* 16.12; 16.16–26). These events in Ionia have been extensively studied by Perea-Yébenes (2012), a work omitted by Burgeon, who limits himself to quoting these facts in a single line (81).

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