

## REVIEW–DISCUSSION

## NEPOS AS A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHER

Rex Stem, *The Political Biographies of Cornelius Nepos*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. Pp. 304. Hardback, \$70.00. ISBN 978-0-472-11838-0.

Nearly thirty years separate the publication of Geiger's *Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography* and Rex Stem's new book, *The Political Biographies of Cornelius Nepos*.<sup>1</sup> Stem's *Political Biographies* represents a significant step forward in the study of Nepos' works. Geiger established Nepos as an author worthy of study for his innovative contributions to Latin literature. Now Stem, building on Geiger's work and benefiting from the growing scholarly interest in exemplarity in Roman culture, has endeavored to read Nepos' longest extant works, *On Foreign Commanders*, *Cato*, and *Atticus*, on their own terms—as *exemplary biography* written to offer moral models (and anti-models) of political and military action to readers of the Triumviral period. Thus, whereas Geiger's work primarily grappled with the difficult and contentious history of the biographical genre to establish Nepos' place in it, Stem offers a lucid introduction to Nepos and a persuasive, historically informed reading of Nepos' extant works. As such Stem's work is indispensable reading for those interested in the intellectual history of the Late Republic, exemplarity in Roman literature, and the evolution of the biographical genre.

Stem faced a Herculean task in overcoming the enduring, negative view of Nepos and his work. Even Geiger's depiction of Nepos as the innovative scholar who invented the subgenre of political biography met with a fair amount of criticism.<sup>2</sup> Modern assumptions continue to distort our expectations regarding biography, and likewise of Nepos. Nepos has since at least the nineteenth century been perceived to be a poor writer and an even worse historian.<sup>3</sup> This view has shaped modern interpretations of the mentions of Nepos in the works of his contemporaries. In this light, Catullus' dedication to Nepos must be barbed, subversive, or at least subtly ironic (1–11). Since Nepos is a

<sup>1</sup> Geiger (1985).

<sup>2</sup> Pryzwanski (2009) 101–2.

<sup>3</sup> Farnell (1891) v: 'Cornelius Nepos is a useful author for a series of elementary Classics, since he not only affords passages of simple and easy Latin suitable for boys ... That [Nepos] is very far from trustworthy in details as a historian is of course well known, but I have endeavored to avoid passages involving flagrant historical errors ...' Farnell writes as one who has inherited, not initiated, these views.

bad author, Catullus could not have sincerely appreciated his work. Similarly, Cicero disdained Nepos as an intellectual inferior whose criticisms of the great man were a source of irritated bemusement (61–83). Stem successfully overcomes these misperceptions through a careful and judicious interpretation of the primary sources.

Conceding, for the most part, the issue of literary style, Stem shows how Catullus' praise for Nepos' *Chronica* could, on the basis of fact alone, be entirely sincere (10–11). The *Chronica*, though superseded by the more approachable work of *Atticus*, was a genuine innovation and a feat requiring much scholarly labor. In the case of Cicero's esteem for Nepos, Stem not only plausibly reinterprets *Att.* 16.5.5 in such a way that Cicero's putative disdain is recast as a lighthearted way of defusing tension among friends, he shows that elsewhere Cicero's interactions with Nepos evince an attitude of respectful, albeit not especially warm, intellectual discussion—hardly what one would expect if Cicero held a view of Nepos similar to Horsfall's (80–3).<sup>4</sup> Thus Stem carefully builds a case for the generally positive regard Nepos' associates had of him as an author and thinker, thereby throwing into question the foundations of modern disregard for Nepos' work. It is regrettable that such rehabilitation is necessary, but one should thank Stem for having done it so well.

More consequential perhaps is the criticism of Nepos as an inept historian, because it reveals the degree to which the biographical genre continues to be misunderstood. One can safely assume that, in writing his biographies, Nepos recognizes he is not writing history; the comparison of biography and history only becomes an issue for him when the content of his biographies ventures into the traditional realm of history.<sup>5</sup> This point cannot be stressed enough. The subject matter of *On Foreign Commanders* sufficiently overlapped with history that Nepos was concerned his work might be judged by the wrong criteria. Otherwise Nepos appears not to have worried about the historical nature of biography at all. To the contrary, the thought would not have crossed his mind had he not sought to write biographies of men that undertook deeds usually covered by historians. Indeed, in a genre wherein poets' lives were conjured from allegedly personal details culled from their poetry, one should question the expectation of historical accuracy in all ancient biography, including biography touching on the traditional content of history.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fact that this line of criticism stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of biography, Stem takes on those of Nepos' critics who fault him for his many historical errors, arguing that Nepos has been unfairly judged

<sup>4</sup> Horsfall (1982) 290–2 provided perhaps the most derogatory depiction of Nepos of any reader, when he called Nepos 'an intellectual pygmy'.

<sup>5</sup> *Pelopidas* 1: *cuius de virtutibus dubito, quemadmodum exponam, quod vereor; si res explicare incipiam, ne non vitam eius enarrare, sed historiam videar scribere.*

<sup>6</sup> Lefkowitz (1981).

(33–54). Granting that errors exist (the conflation of the two Miltiades being perhaps the most egregious example), Stem picks apart criticisms of certain of Nepos' historical errors to show that, accurate or inaccurate, his claims were, for the most part, not particularly egregious, nor his methods exceptionally poor.<sup>7</sup> According to Stem, some of Nepos' supposed errors can be attributed to his desire to emphasize a certain aspect of his subject in order to make the overall portrait better conform to his biographical design (44).<sup>8</sup> Stem also shows how closely Nepos follows Thucydides in his portrait of Themistocles, evincing Nepos' ability to avail himself of some of the best Greek historical scholarship, for reasons any historian should approve of: 'I believe Thucydides above all, since he was the closest in time out of all those who left behind a history of that period, and he was of the same city [as Themistocles].'<sup>9</sup> Again, Stem shows what a sensitive and careful reading of the sources can achieve in elucidating an author who has long been misjudged.

After effectively tackling the greatest obstructions to a fair appraisal of Nepos' work, Stem embarks upon the task of elucidating *On Foreign Generals* as exemplary biography (ch. 4). Here Stem is building an upsurge in scholarly interest in exemplary discourse in Roman literature that started in the first decade of the new millennium.<sup>10</sup> This scholarship has revealed how Roman interest in individual lives was not aimed at fulfilling modern expectations of factual accuracy. Figures of the Roman past both represented and promoted the status of their respective families and the greatness of Rome. Their deeds, along with other aspects of their identities, were commemorated, embellished, and even falsified in service of the needs and ambitions of the present.<sup>11</sup>

Among those perceived needs was to cultivate virtuous people in the rising generation or to persuade those who were in power to behave virtuously. Certain anecdotes from the lives of historical persons were culled from a variety of sources for the purpose of providing a narrative space in which people could

<sup>7</sup> Horsfall (1982) 292 places the Miltiades error at the head of his list of Nepos' errors.

<sup>8</sup> 'He is a biographer who has achieved brevity by substituting a part for the whole, a substitution that may ultimately mislead the reader about what specifically happened but that succeeds in casting what Nepos felt to be the right light on the character of his subject. Nepos does not seek to misconstrue events, but absolute truth is less important to him than definitive characterization.'

<sup>9</sup> Stem (trans.) 44–53; *Themistocles* 9.1.

<sup>10</sup> Two representative and influential examples are Chaplin (2000) and Roller (2004).

<sup>11</sup> Cic. *Brut.* 62: *ipsae enim familiae sua quasi ornamenta ac monumenta servabant et ad usum, si quis eiusdem generis occidisset, et ad memoriam laudum domesticarum et ad illustrandam nobilitatem suam. quamquam his laudationibus historia rerum nostrarum est facta mendosior. multa enim scripta sunt in eis quae facta non sunt: falsi triumphi, plures consulatus, genera etiam falsa et ad plebem transitiones, cum homines humiliores in alienum eiusdem nominis infunderentur genus.* On 'faking it', see Ridley (1983); Beard (2007) 75–80. See also Flower (2009) 68–74 for forms of commemoration other than the written ones.

reflect on issues of individual conduct. These anecdotes are *exempla*—models of behavior, good and bad, that prompt readers to emulate virtuous conduct, and to avoid the unethical. Stem persuasively argues that *On Foreign Generals*, paired with a series on Roman commanders, was designed specifically to provide comparative *exempla* appropriate for a time when great military commanders were outstripping the traditional limits of Republican magistracy and through their dominance threatening the Republic's future (130–229). The peerless commander Epaminondas refuses to enter the civil war for fear of harming a fellow citizen (163–88). His second, Pelopidas, kills his fellow citizens because he cannot abide tyranny (189–200). Agesilaus breaks off a promising campaign against the Persians to obey the command of Sparta's ephors (200–27). Through his comparative method, Nepos seeks to persuade his readers of the universal and normative nature of the virtue of the commander placing the interests of a republic above one's self.

Not only is Stem's argument for the design and purpose of *On Foreign Generals* persuasive, but it also greatly clarifies the sense in which Nepos' biographies may be said to be political biography. Nepos' biographies are political in that they touch on the kind of people and affairs that are of supreme political consequence in Nepos' day. Nepos might have written serial biographies on the kings of Persia, but such a work would have been of little value to the situation facing the Roman Republic, particularly if the Republican views of *optimates* such as Cicero were to serve as the ideal.<sup>12</sup> The lives of kings in Persia could hardly be applicable to Roman men of affairs, who were servants of the state, not monarchs upon whom the state itself was perceived to be contingent. Nepos has thus picked his topic and anecdotes with a particular ideological goal of Republican restoration.

Of course, excellent books are not perfect, and agreement on all points is not necessarily a desideratum for a review. This reader's principal point of difference with the author is on the topic of political biography. It was Geiger who first credited Nepos with the invention of political biography, a subgenre of ancient biography earlier proposed by Leo.<sup>13</sup> Stem accepts the existence of this subgenre, and his contribution is pitched in such a way that he presents himself as expanding and refining Geiger's work, albeit with considerable independence of thought and substantial contribution of his own.<sup>14</sup> Doubtless Geiger's work is both important in its own right and also influential on Stem, as even a cursory perusal of Stem's footnotes makes abundantly apparent. However, Stem's accomplishment, in my view, is the illumination of the polit-

<sup>12</sup> For Stem's discussion of Nepos' sympathy for Cicero's views, see 78–9.

<sup>13</sup> Geiger (1985); Leo (1901).

<sup>14</sup> Stem in fact devotes much of chapter 3 to a defense of Geiger's thesis.

ical purpose of the extant biographies of Nepos in their contemporary environment. The validity of Stem's argument does not necessarily depend on the correctness of Geiger's thesis.

I separate Stem from Geiger in this way because, despite the combined efforts of Geiger and Stem, I remain unconvinced that political biography is a distinct subgenre of ancient biography in any meaningful sense, which Nepos (according to Geiger) invented. One obvious problem is that the fragmentary nature of the evidence makes it somewhat risky to exclude known titles and fragments as possible works of political biography.<sup>15</sup> The more fundamental problem, however, is the very definition of biographical genre and how that definition informs both its boundaries and internal divisions. In preference over Leo's schema of Peripatetic and Alexandrian biography, or Momigliano's definition of biography as the account of an individual's life from birth to death, I adopt Steidle's view: 'for the composition of ancient biography the decisive factor at any time is exclusively the special subject, that is, the individual way of life of the person to be described, rather than any abstractly formal distinction between literary and political personalities'.<sup>16</sup> In biography, an individual life, or a collection of individual lives of a similar type, serves as a lens through which an author may explore a variety of issues or achieve various ends. More restrictive definitions of biography unnecessarily exclude too much, leaving one with a vision of the genre that seems almost as though it were organized around the genius of Plutarch.

Geiger adopts, and Stem defends, a restrictive view that excludes the prose encomium, the historical monograph, the biographical romance, etc. Yet, Nepos' biographies are, for all their touted simplicity, varied and sometimes deceptively complex, raising the possibility that Nepos' work is questionably biographical according to certain restrictive positions. Nepos' *Epaminondas* is positive to the point that it borders on encomium. As in encomium, the youthful life of Epaminondas is presented almost as an idealized precursor to his adult self. Another problematic issue in Nepos' biographical works is the inconsistency in biographical format from one life to the next. Consider the opening words of Nepos' *Timoleon: Timoleon Corinthius*. There is no narrative and barely

<sup>15</sup> Pryzwansky's (2009, 101–2) description of critics of Geiger's thesis well applies to this reviewer: 'Critics ... argue that our lack of earlier political biographies does not prove their non-existence ... Nor is the fact that extant writings cite no pre-Nepotian political biographies conclusive evidence that no such biographies existed, seeing that ancient authors cite their sources so infrequently. In addition ... the differences between *encomium* (which mostly treats political figures, political monograph, intellectual biography, political memoir, and personality-driven history, on the one hand, and political biography, on the other, can be slight; thus Geiger's generic definitions are too narrow.'

<sup>16</sup> Steidle (1963) 166, as cited and translated by Hägg (2012) 68. Leo (1901) 85–135; Momigliano (1993) 11: 'An account of the life of a man from birth to death is what I call biography.'

any mention of Timoleon's family at the opening of the biography. One, in fact, reads nothing of significant events in Timoleon's life before his adulthood, when he successfully opposed his brother's bid for the tyranny of Corinth. Indeed, many of Nepos' biographies provide very spare information regarding the family and childhood of their subjects. Still, Nepos provides *extended* accounts of the family and childhoods of Alcibiades and Epaminondas. Nepos also does not discuss the deaths of Lysander and Iphicrates, although Iphicrates' death notice is implied in his having left behind a son.<sup>17</sup> Such variety in a case as seemingly simple as Nepotian biography militates against the utility of restrictive definitions of the genre. In any case, Momigliano's attractively simple definition of biography does not do Nepos justice.

Nepos' extant biographical works clearly fall into the category of serial biography, which Nepos is not likely to have invented. Originating perhaps as early as the fourth century BCE, works of serial biography contained brief accounts of the lives of figures of a similar type, often intellectuals and poets. There is evidence suggesting serial biography dealt with other kinds of figures as well. Satyrus was credited with writing *Lives of Kings and Generals*, a title that indicates content of political import. Hermippus wrote *Biographies of the Lawgivers*. Ancient law surely fits into the category of political thought and action.<sup>18</sup> Geiger urges us to dismiss the work *On those who passed from Philosophy to Tyranny and Reign* as political biography and calls it a 'specialized form of intellectual biography'. This strikes me as special pleading. The title certainly would apply to a work of political as much as intellectual pertinence.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, if one does not seek assiduously to exclude various earlier works that appear to be serial biography of a political nature, then Nepos' *On Foreign Commanders*, which focuses especially on the relationship between the commander and the state, fits comfortably alongside the others.

*On Foreign Commanders* still represents an innovative contribution to the history of the genre of serial biography. Indeed, comparative, exemplary biography in serial form is most likely Nepos' contribution to the biographical genre. Not only was Nepos the first Latin author to produce a chronology integrating events in Roman and Greek history in his *Chronica*, but he was also the first known Latin author to write an *Exempla*.<sup>20</sup> It stands to reason, therefore, that he was the first Latin author who wrote comparative, serial biography with an exemplary focus. Although this definition of Nepos' biography

<sup>17</sup> *Iphicrates* 3: *Menesthea filium reliquit ex Thraessa natum*.

<sup>18</sup> Geiger (1985) 43.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> *Chronica*: Stem, pp. 2–1; Geiger (1985) 68–73; *Exempla*: Stem, pp. 83–95; Geiger (1985) 73–6.

is not succinct, it is arguably clearer than the confused notion of political biography, which seems to hinge on our acceptance of the idea that biographies of generals are somehow uniquely political in the minds of Romans, whose state magistrates did not, after all, consist entirely of military commanders (is the tribunate politically insignificant?). More generally speaking, the subgenre of political biography as defined by Geiger asks readers to suppose that somehow generals were political but orators and historians were not—the latter being simply untrue in the case of Nepos' biographies of Cato and Atticus. Given the nature of the ancient city-state, the biography of any author, orator, commander, or tyrant had the potential to be applicable to the political issues of the day.

There is one other comparatively minor point of Stem's analysis of Nepos with which I disagree sufficiently to comment. Stem argues against the addition of the non-Greek generals in a second edition of *On Foreign Commanders* published after Atticus' death.<sup>21</sup> Leaving aside the larger issue of Nepos' publication of a substantially different second edition of his works, I will focus on Stem's philological argument regarding *Hannibal* 13, wherein Nepos writes: *namque Atticus ... mortuum in annali suo scriptum reliquit* ('For in his *Annales* Atticus has left a written account of [Hannibal's] death'). Whereas other scholars have suggested that *reliquit* indicated that Atticus had already died when Nepos wrote this passage of the *Hannibal*, Stem argues that *scriptum reliquit* simply indicates that Atticus produced a written account, and that the perfect tense of the verb does not require a dead Atticus.

While I would agree that the prior death of Atticus is not required for Nepos to have written *scriptum reliquit*, even the various instances of this expression Stem adduces to support his argument tend, in my mind, to do quite the opposite (27 n. 79). The cited instances of *scriptum relinquere* almost invariably imply a distance between the author and his written product, or between authors (the author and his predecessor[s]), that Stem's reading does not allow. Stem cites *Brutus* chapters 75 and 90, wherein Cicero refers to Cato *the Elder* (long deceased in Cicero's day) as having left behind a written account (*scriptum reliquit*) of something. In Stem's view, the significance of Cicero's uses of *scriptum reliquit* is limited to the contrasting of written and oral accounts.<sup>22</sup> In 75, however, Cicero informs his reader that Cato wrote about the existence of oral poetry but did not provide the poems themselves. *Scriptum reliquit* here emphasizes the inaccessibility of the ancient oral poetry the long-dead Cato wrote about *en passant*. In *Brutus* 90, Cicero discusses Cato's participation in and eye-

<sup>21</sup> Stem provides a brief bibliography for the arguments concerning the second edition of *On Foreign Generals* at 25 n. 76.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*: 'The phrase denotes that reference is being made to a written source rather than an oral one.'

witness account of certain events, which he subsequently inserted into his *Origines* shortly before his death (89): *quam orationem in Origines suas rettulit, paucis ante quam mortuus est [an] diebus an mensibus*. One cannot, it seems to me, separate Cicero's use of *scriptum reliquit* in 90 from Cato's death mentioned in chapter 89!

Stem also brings in parallel examples from Nepos to support his argument. In *Hannibal* 8, Nepos refers to writers who left behind conflicting accounts of Mago's death: *interfectum eum scriptum reliquerunt*. This passage is nicely parallel to *Hannibal* 13 in that both passages mention the accounts of deaths certain authors have left behind. The difference between the two passages, however, is not negligible. In *Hannibal* 8, the authors are unidentified, and yet at least some of them (Polybius? Sulpicius Blitho?) are deceased at the time of Nepos' writing.<sup>23</sup> In his *In Verrem*, Cicero uses a similar expression to refer to the many Greek authors who left behind descriptions of the doors of the temple of Athena at Syracuse. Again, the expression *multi Graeci ... scriptum reliquerint* implies a certain distance between the speaker, Cicero, and the authors who left these accounts. In any case, *scriptum relinquere* is not, in my opinion, the kind of expression one uses of the books written by one's living friend.

Nepos, in fact, not infrequently uses the word *relinquere* in connection with someone's death. This is especially true of the *Hannibal*, wherein one finds *relinquere* used in the context of someone's death no less than three times. The first instance is Hannibal's preservation of his dead father's legacy of hatred toward the Romans: *hereditate **relictum** odium paternum erga Romanos*. Hamilcar conceived a hatred for the Romans, and he died, but he left this hatred behind for his sons to carry on. The second instance regards the death of Mago as cited above. Here one sees how Hannibal's relentless pursuit of Hamilcar's legacy of hatred leads to the death of Mago.

The final instance in the *Hannibal* is Atticus' leaving a written account of the death of Hannibal in his *Annales*: *mortuum scriptum reliquit*. This wording also closely parallels the implied death notice in the biography of *Iphicrates*: *Menesthea filium reliquit ex Thraessa natum*. Indeed, given the fact that both phrases are located in a death notice, it seems likely to this reader that Nepos deliberately constructs a metaphor of Atticus' relationship with his writing that assimilates Atticus as the father of his work to a father such as Iphicrates, who conceived a child and then left it behind through his passage to the afterlife, or such as Hamilcar Barca, who conceived a hatred of the Romans and then died, leaving his legacy of hatred behind for his sons.<sup>24</sup> Nepos wants his reader

<sup>23</sup> Too little is known about Sulpicius Blitho to say whether he was alive or dead at the time of Nepos' composition of *On Foreign Generals*. He is assumed to have lived in the first century BCE. On Blitho, see Cornell (2013) 1.429, 2.852–3.

<sup>24</sup> For the trope of author as father in Plato's *Phaedrus*, see Derrida and Kamuf (1991) 112–42. Ovid addresses his *libellus* as its father in *Tristia* 1.



to know that Atticus' *Annales* were a similarly impactful legacy—a positive one in this case—left to him by his deceased friend, but no doubt a positive one. One might even suggest that Nepos is here suggesting a kind of Attican paternity for Nepos' biographical project.

That I spent this much time on the relatively minor point of the meaning of *scriptum reliquit* should be taken as high praise of an extremely valuable addition to scholarship on Latin biography and Cornelius Nepos. Stem's elucidation of Nepos' biography should prompt other similarly careful and insightful readers to continue to pull at the threads of Nepos' deceptively simple work. In reality, Nepos' biographies are anything but simple, and, while avoiding the pitfalls of prescribing narrow, historically determined readings of these texts, Stem has especially shed light on the complicated issue of how Nepos' work addressed the political problems of his time. Furthermore, Stem's book opens our eyes to the possibility of looking forward in history, armed with Stem's insights, to the reception of Nepos in the Early Empire up to the Flavians (at least). One anticipates and hopes for further work from Stem and those inspired by his work to unfold the complex ideological and literary legacy Nepos *scriptum reliquit*.

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