

REVIEW

A NEW LOOK AT NEPOS

John Alexander Lobur, *Cornelius Nepos: A Study in the Evidence and Influence*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021. Pp. xiv + 305. Hardcover, \$80.00. ISBN 978-0-472-13274-4.

In 1985, Joseph Geiger argued that Cornelius Nepos was not just the first writer of biographies in Latin, but in fact invented the genre of political biography in Greek and Roman antiquity.¹ The latter claim has won few unqualified endorsements, but Geiger's book, along with a pair of influential 1988 articles by Carlotta Dionisotti and Fergus Millar, ended up fertilising a field of studies bearing monographic fruit every decade or so: by Sabine Anselm in 2004, the late Rex Stem in 2012, and now John Alexander Lobur in 2021.² Like those studies, Lobur's *Cornelius Nepos: A Study in the Evidence and Influence* engages in the work of 'rehabilitation' (e.g., 3)—of an author maligned since the nineteenth century and largely relegated to disdainful footnotes or the desks of schoolchildren. But where Dionisotti reads Nepos' biographies primarily against the political and social tumult of the Triumviral period, or Anselm argues for the literary artistry and narrative sophistication of the *Lives*, or Stem positions Nepos as a stalwart defender of Roman republicanism, Lobur—in a manner more akin to, but going far beyond, Millar's treatment of Nepos' *Atticus*—advocates for the centrality of Nepos and his corpus to the entire ideological underpinnings of the emerging principate.

'Rehabilitation' is a tricky business. For it involves revisiting both the ancient evidence and the wounds inflicted by modern disparagement while offering up new ways to approach and understand the author and his work. By contrast, casting a (colonialist) slur is easy.³ Happily, Lobur is more than up to the challenge here. Comprising seven chapters with a brief introduction

¹ Geiger (1985).

² Dionisotti (1988); Millar (1988); Anselm (2004); and Stem (2012). One of the dedicatees of Lobur's book is Rex Stem, whose untimely passing (in October 2020) is a major loss to the study of Cornelius Nepos and ancient biography in general (as well as to those who had the privilege to know him personally, including the present author). As Lobur acknowledges in the preface (ix), innumerable footnotes attest, and the present review occasionally notes, Stem's work is perhaps Lobur's most important scholarly precursor.

³ So Horsfall (1982) 290.

and conclusion, his densely ambitious book breaks down into two halves: the first three chapters recuperative, the latter four advancing the claim that Nepos was a Triumviral-era harbinger of the content (i.e., moralising), mode (exemplary), and form (autocracy) embraced by the coming principate. The challenge here is that readers uninvested in re-litigating past scholarly estimations will find themselves mired in the first half's heavy-going—and sometimes overly defensive—discussions of testimonia, historical minutiae, and source criticism. Lobur is not unaware of this potential downside (cf. 3–4), and I second his (implied) suggestion that such readers jump directly to the fourth chapter.

Chapter 1 reviews 'Nepos' *Nachleben* to remind readers that his ancient ones never deemed the biographer to be 'small' in the ways that modern critics have. Nepos could, of course, be subject to ancient criticism on specific points of substance—only three 'unequivocal' instances (12–14), on Lobur's reckoning. But the volume of positive ancient testimonia and moments of influence—some more speculative than others—underpin Lobur's main points: that Nepos was regarded as no 'substandard writer' and, in fact, 'should be read as something of [an ancient] literary celebrity' (10), who measures up to the likes of Atticus, Varro, and (less plausibly) Cicero. One disappointment here. Catullus's (in)famous praise in *Carmen* 1—the earliest *testimonium* we possess—looms large in modern assessments of Nepos, and its interpretation as 'ironic' informs much of the 'belittling' view. In this case alone, Lobur's tactic is to declaim the impossibility of decisively interpreting the evidence on its own terms, instead using later authors' 'sincere' redeployments of the praise as verification of Catullus's straightforward 'sincerity' as well (15–17 with 10 n. 4 and 89). Aside from the intrinsic weakness of argument by reception, I do not see why Catullus—an author writing by way of a famously conflicted, wry, self-deprecating, and shifting persona—could not have been speaking both ways. Stem's interpretation is thus to be preferred.⁴

Ever since Nipperdey's 1849 commentary, Nepos' *Lives* has offered a 'happy hunting-ground' for historical inaccuracies and errors.⁵ Rehabilitation in Chapter 2 ('Error and Accuracy in Nepos') takes the form of a meticulous review of these infelicities—most real, some imagined. Unlike, e.g., Anselm's penchant for interpreting mistakes in the *Lives* as part of deliberate authorial design, Lobur's goal is to exonerate Nepos from his reputation as an egregiously negligent and obtuse scholar by arguing that none of these historical problems distinguish him from other ancient writers. What they instead reveal, Lobur argues, is a writer working squarely within the standard historiographical methods and conventions of Greek and Roman antiquity—

⁴ Stem (2012) 1–11.

⁵ So Jenkinson (1967) 10, cited by Lobur at 31; cf. 6.

albeit re-calibrated for his specific project of writing short biographies of foreign generals for a Roman audience. Thus, in some cases, Nepos appears to be following closely an already mistaken source. For example, Ephorus, likely following Pherecydes and Hellanicus before him, bears responsibility for Nepos' infamous confusion of Miltiades with an uncle in the life's opening line. Or the difficult chronology of Hannibal's march reflects an author working quickly from memory, with the express goal of abbreviation, and more interested in, as Nepos puts it in *Pelopidas* 1.1, writing a 'life' (*vita*) and its 'virtues' (*virtutes*) rather than a 'history' (*historia*) with its 'events' (*res*)—in what amounts to the first Latin articulation of generic difference between biography and history. 'Exclusions' and 'exaggerations' receive similar explanations. Lurking throughout are the Wiseman and Woodman approaches to historiography with their recourse to rhetorical *colores* and *inventio*⁶—most often directed by Nepos towards making biographies of non-Roman commanders more relatable to Roman readers or underscoring a particular moral lesson. Still, even those scholars who have no truck with 'rhetorical' historiography would benefit from consulting this chapter, which often provides persuasive rationales for mistakes and makes a good case for not automatically writing Nepos off as 'negligent' or 'unhistorical'.

Zooming out from the historical particulars, Chapter 3 ('The Sources of a Learned Biographer') considers Nepos' use of sources more broadly. Reconsideration of Nepos' rendering of Thuc. 1.137 at *Them.* 9.4 shows him, *contra* modern detractors, to be a thoughtful and skilled translator. Pre-emptive arguments against the notion that Nepos was slavishly following or copying one source or another give way to a survey of all the sources that Lobur, synthesising over a century's worth of criticism and adding his own contributions, detects in the *Lives*. This section is especially hard going in its complexity (and writing), but a couple of upshots emerge. First, Ephorus, by way of 'correspondences with Diodorus', emerges as the 'narrative thread onto which comparative material is grafted' and the prime source for *Lives of the Foreign Commanders* up to 341 (79; cf. 41). Second, the range of sources also speaks to Nepos' relatively sophisticated methods of working and illuminates, e.g., his principle of privileging sources contemporaneous with the figures he treats. A final section concludes this chapter (and the previous one) with recapitulation of Lobur's overall case that Nepos was a competent scholar, conversant in Greek and Roman sources, and adhering to widely accepted principles of historiography.

The result of these two chapters? Properly understood on its own terms, the *Lives* 'is probably as much as one could expect from anyone at the time, extremely ambitious, and one might say, sophisticated and learned' (86).

⁶ Cf. esp. 36 with n. 18. For 'rhetorical' historiography, see Woodman (1988) and Wiseman (1979).

Lobur's arguments will likely not do much to stir those readers who come in with an already dim view of Nepos' ability to handle historical material. But what Lobur does accomplish is to mitigate the inordinate blame Nepos has often been made to bear—not infrequently a result of modern scholars 'projecting their own objectivizing standards' (41). More importantly, he (like others before) re-frames the proper terms of evaluation for Nepos: from a 'historian' per se to a 'biographer', whose goal is to offer 'a sketch of a general's character for exemplary purposes' (45).

With apologetics now (mostly) out of the way, Chapter 4 turns to 'Nepos' Contemporary Relationships' with Catullus, Cicero, and Atticus as well as the Roman public at large. Consideration of the first mostly relies on the aforementioned 'sincere' understanding of *Carmen* 1 and the well-known fact that each was part of the Cisalpine avant-garde. But Lobur's discussion of Cicero and Atticus offers more that is new. Pressing hard the implications of Stem's already excellent analysis of the relevant evidence,⁷ Lobur posits an even closer relationship between Nepos and Cicero. Of the two, Stem's discussion remains the more prudent—if only because Lobur does not, in my view, successfully resolve various difficulties in Cicero's correspondence for his position (esp. Cic. *Att.* 16.14.4 = *FRHist* 45 T 3; Cic. *Att.* 16.5.5 = *FRHist* 45 T 2). But emphasising that their 'intellectual activities ... [were] considerably interwoven' (97) does, like Stem's approach, offer a productive approach to the demonstrable similarities (and intriguing differences) in their works and outlooks. Even more intriguing is the role that Lobur sketches for Atticus. No longer mostly just facilitating the relationship between Nepos and Cicero, Atticus emerges as a vibrant actor here and in the rest of the study: as a muse and intellectual director of sorts for Nepos' biographies, as a social and cultural model for the author himself, and as a possible (even probable?) conduit of access to men like Antony and Octavian. Notwithstanding the phenomenon of 'automimesis' in biographical writing,⁸ Lobur's suggestion that the 'Atticus' of *Atticus* constitutes an attempt 'to project himself, or what he would like to see himself as' (101) perhaps goes too far—and may in fact be counter-productive to the view of Nepos as the dynamic and independent-minded elite he otherwise promotes. Still, Lobur ends up positioning Nepos at the forefront of the period's intellectual and cultural revolution (*à la* Wallace-Hadrill)⁹ in which *exempla*—and *not*, e.g., the philosophical disputation of Cicero, Brutus, Cato, and their (republican) ilk—will play a central role in 'a national program of moral renewal' (104). Not merely extending Cicero's 'patriotic service' (114) of 'romanising' Greek material to biography (104), Nepos is understood to

⁷ Stem (2012) 61–83.

⁸ Hägg (2012) 5–6, discussed by Lobur at 101 n. 56.

⁹ Wallace-Hadrill (1997) and (2008). Unfortunately missing is engagement with Moatti (1997).

surpass Cicero in two respects: first, by virtue of being the ‘first of the Italians’ (cf. *unus Italorum*: Cat. 1.1) to ‘create a totalizing Roman vision of world history with the *Chronica* that synchronized Greece and Rome into one temporal unity’ (116); and second, as a writer distilling essential biographical sketches for not just fellow elites but also, following (among others) Morstein-Marx and Wiseman,¹⁰ the broader public at large.

Chapter 5 treats ‘The Fragments of Nepos and their Cultural-Ideological Context’. Discussion proceeds along thematic lines. In the case of ‘decadence’, Lobur’s survey of two usual suspects, Sallust and Livy, along with snippets from Varro’s corpus, situates an illuminating discussion of similar themes (e.g., prestige foodstuffs, luxurious building materials) in Nepos’ fragments, mostly preserved by Pliny and often assigned to the non-extant *Chronica*. On this basis, Lobur interestingly suggests that the *Chronica* might have been structured ‘around the theme [of luxury consumption] in a way that prefigures Livy’s project as explicated in his preface’ (128). But speculation that this structure amounts to a degree of originality is not supportable—at least not without a fuller exposition and proper engagement with Varro’s difficult corpus. Still, the discussion firmly establishes Nepos’ place alongside other moralisers of the period. Equally illuminating are the discussions of Nepos’ self-fashioning as one of the *maiores* and as a proponent of ‘the new “archaic” lifestyle’—the latter particularly well attested through the depiction of Atticus’ aesthetics and lifestyle (*Att.* 13) but also perhaps glimpsed in another fragment that surfaces *via* Suetonius (*Aug.* 77) concerning Octavian’s drinking habits. A section speculating about the lost full-length version of *Cato* seems to suggest that Nepos also positioned himself as his generation’s Cato the Elder—a moral exemplar frequently touted by, as Lobur notes, the future Augustus himself (*Suet. Aug.* 87.1)!—but the discussion remains too oblique and underdeveloped to accept without reservation. All in all, the chapter substantiates its case that Nepos was acutely interested in the *moral* problems perceived to underlie the faltering condition of Rome’s *res publica*—and that he, with Atticus, was thus positioned to be an ‘invaluable source of information for the cultural ideation that seeded [the] implicit ideology’ (145) of the coming regime.

The final two chapters are best read as a pair. Chapter 6 first examines ‘Nepos and Triumviral Political Ideology’, a pregnant formulation signifying the way that Nepos’ *Lives* are written against the backdrop of, engage with, and perhaps even shape the content of, the political-intellectual environs in which the Triumvirs and their opponents were operating. Lobur firmly rejects any consideration of the *Lives* as a political ‘pamphlet’ or ‘propaganda’ (e.g., 152) for one side or another—even when the work veers dangerously close to republican-style criticism of the Triumvirs (in, e.g., the *Thrasylbulus*) or, con-

¹⁰ Morstein-Marx (2004) and Wiseman (2015).

versely, endorsement of one man rule (see below). In this respect, Lobur breaks decisively from both Stem's estimation of the biographer as a 'republican' of the 'optimat' variety and Anselm's suggestion of the *Lives* as a 'mirror for princes' (*Fürstenspiegel*), especially for the young Octavian.¹¹ Instead, Lobur positions Nepos as a proto-Tacitus, who 'demonstrates the earliest identifiable emergence of an "imperial" republicanism that ... maintains its old ethos but has adapted to new political realities' (152). Central to his argument is the contention that expressions on behalf of *libertas* (or Greek *dēmokratia*) may involve denouncing 'tyranny', but only insofar as that 'tyranny' is understood through a 'moral and not constitutional' lens. Conversely, so long as an autocrat was of good moral character and, moreover, popularly sanctioned, that ruler was not necessarily 'tyrannical' nor even illegitimate. The central exhibit here is the *Miltiades*, which is the first of the *Lives* and which, on Lobur's extremely subtle reading and engaged intertextually via Cicero's *De Officiis*, floats the possibility of a 'just tyrant' (*tyrannus ... iustus*, 8.3), whose power is consensually conferred by the people, grounded in morality, and respectful of ancestral custom. Thus does Nepos open a discursive space in the language of Roman republicanism to tolerate—perhaps even endorse—the emergence of autocracy.

Chapter 7 ('Nepos and the Articulation of Imperial Political Etiquette') brings Nepos' *Lives* into dialogue with Octavian's transformation into Augustus, which the biographer probably lived to see.¹² Similar to Livy's use, Nepos' deployment of the *unus vir* theme helps to 'mentally [bridge] the transition from republic and empire' (189).¹³ Ensuing (and occasionally tortured) close readings of such great men as Epaminondas, Themistocles, Alcibiades, and Pausanias reveal that their actions were extraordinary, unconstitutional, and sometimes contrary to custom—yet patriotic in motivation, done for the common good, and not intrinsically immoral. Lobur follows, e.g., Dionisotti and Stem in understanding these Greek lives to resonate with Nepos' original Roman audience and their experiences with similarly problematic behaviour of 'great' generals from 49 onwards; on his view, however, these stories, received by way of republican analogues, collectively point to the failed possibility of any constitutional (let alone senatorial) solution to Rome's problems and the concomitant need for a moral one. Re-enter Nepos' 'odd level of comfort with the patently unrepublican idea of a benevolent autocrat' (202), which the biographer, on Lobur's reading, holds out as offering a potential solution to Rome's predicament. The challenge is that the ill-will (*invidia*) fellow citizens feel towards such leaders in the *Lives* is both 'the only

¹¹ Stem (2012) 236, cf. 75; Anselm (2004) 171.

¹² For 27 BCE as the *terminus post quem*, see Pliny *HN* 10.60, which Lobur discusses on 130.

¹³ Lobur follows Santoro L'hoir (1990).

thing that limits [their] power' (206) and the source of their downfall. Hence the need for the 'benevolent potentate' (cf. 228) to manage *invidia* through the titular 'political etiquette'—in the form of a voluntary *recusatio* that 'proved one was worthy of [power]' as well as other gestures. If this formulation conjures up, e.g., Augustus's famous claim in *RG* 34.1, that is precisely where Lobur now proceeds in his detailed explication of the *Timoleon*, which, as the last of the *Lives*, stands in ring-composition with the *Miltiades* and 'prefigures the ideology of the early principate' (207). Any qualms readers may have had with prior close readings are likely to dissipate in this case, with Lobur masterfully eliciting a trove of vocabulary and themes shared by, and historical parallels between, this biography and such crucial sources for Augustan ideology as the *Res Gestae*, Cassius Dio, and material evidence. For example, Timoleon's abdication of his generalship after liberating *tota Sicilia* and retirement as a nominally private citizen who still held office sporadically and pre-emptively vetted matters of public business map almost directly onto the 'cultural-political scripting' (cf. 217) that Octavian-cum-Augustus follows in the 20s and beyond. Concluding forays into the presence of similar themes in other *Lives* and additional evidence from Velleius Paterculus and Suetonius add more content, but it is the reading of *Timoleon* that serves as both the chapter's centrepiece and the lynchpin for the book's overall argument that, when it comes to early imperial ideology, Nepos was one of the preeminent 'cultural blacksmiths at the triumviral forge' (241).

This closing image—of Nepos re-firing previously cast material and bending it to new purpose—neatly encapsulates the fine line Lobur walks in crediting Nepos as an important voice and innovative writer of his era but not necessarily an original thinker *per se*. One might compare his earlier characterisation of Nepos, along with Atticus, as 'representatives of the Italian elite', who 'worked to fashion something new out of "old" republican elements reshaped or invented to suit their purposes' (157). But calling them 'adaptable agents of a rising new order' in the same paragraph does, despite claims elsewhere, keep alive the question of Nepos as a possible 'propagandist'—especially considering the proximity to Octavian and Antony that Lobur reconstructs for Nepos *via* Atticus. To be sure, Lobur is limited by the state of the evidence here. But the result is a certain indeterminacy and tension to his depiction of Nepos: as the *earliest* extant avatar of an 'imperial republicanism' and closely connected to the uppermost echelons of the triumviral cause, yet not necessarily writing for (or on behalf of) them or even bearing any credit (or responsibility?) for messaging that the victor is said to have soon embraced. Conversely, one might wonder whether Lobur, e.g., undervalues the role of Cicero in formulating the notion of a 'just tyrant'—which could very well be Nepos' paradoxical riff on the idealised 'kingship' sketched in *De Republica* 1 and perhaps exemplified in Romulus' and Numa's strongly 'republican'

monarchies in the second book's historical narrative.¹⁴ But the fact that Lobur's book raises such questions is a mark of its strengths and value—not just for understanding Nepos but also for the way that it puts him into the thick of Roman political and intellectual culture of the 50s, 40s, 30s, and (now) 20s.

The book is well produced and largely free of typos, though the misspelling of Anselm's name in roughly one-third of the fifty-plus citations is unfortunate (and maybe more noticeable to someone whose own surname, perhaps more understandably, is also spelled two different ways). The inclusion of an exhaustive *Index Locorum* alongside the General Index is especially commendable.

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¹⁴ For Lobur's engagement with monarchy in *De Republica*, see esp. 163–4.

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