The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Biography
THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

ANCIENT BIOGRAPHY

Edited by
KOEN DE TEMMERMAN
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During its long gestation period, the volume has benefitted greatly from the help and support of a number of people. It is my delightful duty, first and foremost, to thank wholeheartedly all contributors for their hard work and the pleasant collaboration. My warmest thanks also go to Hilary O’Shea, the commissioning editor at OUP who invited me to put together this volume, to Charlotte Loveridge, who took over its supervision in the process, and to Alexander Johnson, Jenny King, and Georgina Leighton for their kind and most professional guidance along the way.

The initial proposal for this book has been improved considerably thanks to the suggestions and comments of the referees at OUP. My thoughts on ancient life-writing have further been enriched by stimulating discussions with Kristoffel Demoen, Stephen Harrison, Irene de Jong, Wolfgang de Melo, Chris Pelling, Danny Praet, and Tim Whitmarsh. For editorial assistance, I thank Pauline De Groote, Lotte Van Olmen, and Robbe Van de Velde. Special thanks go to Evelien Bracke, who joined the project during its final stage and has provided indispensable and characteristically efficient practical and editorial support; and to Susan Dunsmore for copy-editing.

Finally, a warm note of gratitude and love goes to my parents, Ignace and Linda, to Lieselot, and to Jacob and Isaac. To them the story of my own life owes its vividness and delight.

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In academic education, biography courses are quite frequent these days. Ancient biography has become the object of research and teaching not only in many Classics departments, but also in literary studies, philosophy, and history departments—and in high school curricula in some countries. Given its function as a broad introduction and a reference tool, on the one hand, and its ambition to move beyond the state-of-the-art on the other, this Handbook will, I hope, be of interest to a variety of readers. First, to newcomers in the field such as undergraduate students, who can use individual chapters for orientation, for inspiration for productive insights and/or as introductory aids to their own research. Second, to more advanced, graduate students, academic specialists, scholars, and researchers working on ancient literature in general and ancient biography in particular. I hope that academic faculty will find the volume helpful for their teaching too. And, third, to a broad range of students and scholars who work in related disciplines and/or study other periods or literatures and all have reason to hark back to ancient biographical narrative: scholars in religious studies, reception studies, medieval, Renaissance and post-Renaissance lifewriting, etc.

In view of such a broad audience, contributors have been encouraged to write in a way that is accessible to non-experts. Chapters provide English translations of ancient (and modern) terminology and citations. In addition, all individual chapters are concluded by a section containing suggestions for further reading.

For reasons of internal consistency across the book, Greek names of places, persons and literary works have been Latinized as much as possible (e.g. Halicarnassus, Thucydides, Cyropaedia) but English spelling is used where common (e.g. Corinth, Homer, Odyssey). If there is no Latinized equivalent commonly used in English, Greek transcriptions are used (e.g. Sokratikoi logoi, Ion’s Epidémiai). While mostly using Greek transcriptions of Greek nouns and adjectives (e.g. epitaphios logos, mênologion), I have opted for Latin transcriptions when arguably more common in English scholarship (e.g. martyrium and synkrisis rather than martyrion and synkrisis). If these terms have their own entries in the Oxford English Dictionary (2nd edn. 1989), they have in most cases not been italicized (e.g. encomium, ecphrasis). For Latin names too, English spelling is used where common (e.g. Julius rather than Iulius).

In order to distinguish the two current meanings of the word ‘life’ (both ‘the period from birth to death’ and ‘biography’), we capitalize it (‘Life’, plural ‘Lives’) when it is a synonym of ‘biography’ or ‘description of one’s life’. We similarly disambiguate ‘martyrdom’ (the event or concept) and ‘Martyrdom’ (the account), whereas ‘passio/passion’ and ‘acta/acts’ take the lowercase form because they typically refer only to accounts and not concepts. References to titles of specific works (or parts thereof) are not only capitalized but also
italicized (e.g. Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives, Acts of Thomas*). For reasons of economy, we often use shorthand titles (e.g. Suetonius’ *Caesars* for the *Lives of the Caesars*). Finally, historical eras are capitalized (e.g. Late Antiquity); their adjectives are not (e.g. late antique), except if it is helpful for disambiguation—e.g. Imperial authors (as opposed to, for example, imperial administration), Republican Rome, and Classical Greece.
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List of Abbreviations

Ancient texts and authors are cited for the most part using the conventions of the Greek–English Lexicon edited by Liddell, Scott, Jones, and McKenzie (LSJ, for Greek; it also explains abbreviations of (some) epigraphical publications) and A Latin Dictionary edited by Lewis and Short (for Latin). Books of the Bible (Old Testament, New Testament, and apocrypha) are abbreviated according to the Society of Biblical Literature Handbook of Style (2nd edition, Atlanta, 2014).

In the bibliography, abbreviations of periodicals used are those of L’Année Philologique.

In addition, this book uses the following abbreviations:

Adv. Col. Plutarch, Adversus Coloten
AE L’Année épigraphique
ANRW H. Temporini and W. Haase (eds.), Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt. Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung. Part I (vols. 1–4) and Part II (vols. 1–37.3) (Berlin, 1972–)
Antid. Isocrates, Antidosis
Ant. Rom. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Antiquitates Romanae
AP Anthologia Palatina
Aud. Plutarch, De recta ratione audiendi
BHL Socii Bollandiani (eds.), Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina Antiquae et Mediae Aetatis (Brussels, 1898–1899, 1900–1901)
BHO P. Peeters (ed.), Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis. Subsidia Hagiographica 10 (Brussels, 1910)
Bibl. Diodorus Siculus, Bibliotheca historica
BNP Brill’s New Pauly. Antiquity volumes edited by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider; English edition by Christine F. Salazar. Classical Tradition volumes edited by Manfred Landfester; English edition by Francis G. Gentry
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>circa</td>
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<tr>
<td>CANT</td>
<td>M. Geerard (ed.), <em>Clavis Apocryphorum Novi Testamenti</em>. Corpus Christianorum (Turnhout, 1992)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chil.</td>
<td>Tzetzes, <em>Chiliades</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM</td>
<td>Eusebius of Caesarea, <em>Contra Marcellum</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>cod.</td>
<td>codex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Col.</td>
<td>column</td>
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<td>comm.</td>
<td>commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conf.</td>
<td>Aurelius Augustinus, <em>Confessiones</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Contest</td>
<td>Anonymous, <em>Contest of Homer and Hesiod (or Certamen)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conv.</td>
<td>Plutarch, <em>Convivium Septem Sapientium</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CVA</td>
<td><em>Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum</em> (London, 1922–)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>died (followed by date of death)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dial.</td>
<td>Gregory the Great, <em>Dialogi</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DMP[RP]</td>
<td>Eusebius of Caesarea, <em>De Martyribus Palaestinae (recensio prolixior)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>edn.</td>
<td>edition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ep.</td>
<td><em>Epistulae</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Evag.</td>
<td>Isocrates, <em>Evagoras</em></td>
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<td>f.</td>
<td>folio</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>fragment</td>
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Fig. Figure
fl. floruit
gr. graecus
Greg. Naz. Gregory of Nazianzus
Hadr. SHA, Vita Hadriani
HE Eusebius of Caesarea, Historia Ecclesiastica
Heraclid. Lemb. Pol. Heraclides Lembus, Politeiai
Hier. Eusebius of Caesarea, Contra Hieroclem
Hist. Historiae
Hist. Mon. Historia Monachorum in Aegypto
Hist. Rom. Velleius Paterculus, Historia Romana
HL Palladius, Historia Lausiaca
Hom. Pseudo-Plutarch, On the Life and Poetry of Homer (2 treatises)
HR Theodoret of Cyrhrus, Historia Religiosa
IG Inscriptiones Graecae. 15 vols. (Berlin, 1873–)
IGLS Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie (Paris, 1929–)
Inc. Athanasius, De incarnatione verbi Dei
Inschriften von Ephesos AA.VV., Die Inschriften von Ephesos. 8 parts, 10 vols. (Bonn, 1979–1984)
InscrIt Inscriptiones Italicae (1931–)
intro. introduction
IOSPE V.V. Latyshev, Inscriptiones antiquae Orae Septentrionalis Ponti Euxini graecae et latinæ (Saint-Petersburg, 1885–1901). Third online edition (IOSPE³) at https://iospe.kcl.ac.uk
Iov. Jerome, Contra Iovinianum
I.Priene F. Hiller von Gaertringen, Inschriften von Priene (Berlin, 1906)
I.Priene B-M W. Blümel and R. Merkelbach†, Die Inschriften von Priene I-II (IGSK 69; Bonn, 2014)
I.Sestos J. Krauss, Die Inschriften von Sestos und der thrakischen Chersones (IGSK 19; Bonn, 1980)
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<tr>
<td>KD</td>
<td>Key Doctrines, translation for Kuriai Doxai (called Sententiae by LSJ, which invites confusion with a distinct collection of ‘Vatican Sentences’)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leg.</td>
<td>Philo, Legatio ad Gaium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Louvre MA</td>
<td>Musée du Louvre, Antiquités grecques et romaines (followed by catalogue number)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mos.</td>
<td>Philo, Moses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nic.</td>
<td>Isocrates, Nicocles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opif.</td>
<td>Philo, De opificio mundi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or.</td>
<td>Oratio(nes)</td>
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<tr>
<td>orat.</td>
<td>Tatian, Oratio ad Graecos</td>
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<tr>
<td>p.</td>
<td>page</td>
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<tr>
<td>PBerol.</td>
<td>Papyrus Berolinensis</td>
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<tr>
<td>PH</td>
<td>Damascius, Philosophical History (Life of Isidore)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHaun.</td>
<td>Papyrus Hauniensis</td>
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<td>PHer.</td>
<td>Papyrus Herculaneensis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.KRU</td>
<td>W.E. Crum, Koptische Rechtsurkunden des achten Jahrhunderts aus Djème (Theben) (Leipzig, 1912)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.Lond.</td>
<td>Papyrus Londinensis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl(s).</td>
<td>plate(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PO</td>
<td>P. Luisier (ed.), Patrologia Orientalis (Turnhout, 1903–)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poss.</td>
<td>Possidius</td>
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<tr>
<td>POxy.</td>
<td>The Oxyrhynchus Papyri</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prae. ger. reip.</td>
<td>Plutarch, Praecepta gerendae rei publicae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praef.</td>
<td>Praefatio (preface)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prol.</td>
<td>Prologue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prol. in Aristid.</td>
<td>Sopater, Prolegomena in Aristidem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps.</td>
<td>Pseudo-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quaest. Rom.</td>
<td>Plutarch, Quaestiones Romanae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r.</td>
<td>reigned (followed by dates of reign)</td>
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<tr>
<td>repr.</td>
<td>reprint</td>
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<tr>
<td>rev.</td>
<td>revised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RG</td>
<td>Caesar Octavianus Augustus, Res Gestae Divi Augusti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version (Bible)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schol.</td>
<td>scholium</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEG</td>
<td>A. Chaniotis, T. Corsten, N. Papazarkadas, E. Stavrianopoulou, and R.A. Tybout (eds.), Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum (Leiden, 1923–)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SH</td>
<td>H. Lloyd-Jones and P. Parsons (eds.), Supplementum Hellenisticum (Berlin, 1983)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHA</td>
<td>Historia Augusta (so-called)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSR</td>
<td>G. Giannantoni, Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae (Naples, 1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subl.</td>
<td>Pseudo-Longinus, Περὶ ὑψος (de Sublimitate)</td>
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<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Testimonium</td>
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<tr>
<td>trans.</td>
<td>translation/translator</td>
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<tr>
<td>v</td>
<td>verso</td>
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<tr>
<td>V. Ant.</td>
<td>Athanasius, Vita Antonii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Aug.</td>
<td>Possidius, Vita Augustini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VC</td>
<td>Eusebius of Caesarea, Vita Constantini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vell.</td>
<td>Velleius Paterculus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VH</td>
<td>Jerome, Vita Hilarionis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vir. ill.</td>
<td>Jerome, De viris illustribus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vit. Rom.</td>
<td>Anonymous, Vita (Homeri) Romana</td>
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## List of Abbreviations

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<tr>
<td>Vit. Scor.</td>
<td>Anonymous, <em>Vita (Homeri) Scorialensis</em> (1 and 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VM</td>
<td>Jerome, <em>Vita Malchi</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VP</td>
<td>Jerome, <em>Vita Pauli</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPS</td>
<td>Eunapius, <em>Vitae Philosophorum et Sophistarum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VS</td>
<td>Philostratus, <em>Vitae Sophistarum</em></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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PART I

INTRODUCTION
CHAPTER 1

WRITING (ABOUT) ANCIENT LIVES

Scholarship, Definitions, and Concepts

KOEN DE TEMMERMAN

It has become a topos in scholarship on biography to note that it is one of the most widespread literary genres worldwide. Biographies and autobiographies of actors, sportsmen, politicians, singers, Nobel Prize-winners, and other famous people have never been more prominent in book shops and publishers’ catalogues (Dorey 1967: xi; Shelston 1977: 2–15; Backscheider 1999: xiii; France and St Clair 2002: 3). Another indication of the interest triggered by the term as well as the concept of biography is the fact that in modern-day publishing (and marketing), the term often features in book titles not only in reference to persons but also as a metaphor for a startlingly diverse range of other subject matters (see McGing and Mossman 2006b: ix, xvi–xx). A variant of this trope goes back all the way to the third century BC, when Dicaearchus of Messina, a student of Aristotle, according to the Suda (Verhasselt 2018: Ti), entitled his (now fragmentarily preserved) history of Greece as a Bios Hellados (Life of Greece). The work discusses the cultural evolution of the Greek people from earliest times and its title arguably adapts what must then have been a recognizable label for the description of individual lives from childhood onwards (Görgemanns 1997).

In the first century BC, the same trope inspired Jason of Nysa (Bios Hellados) and Varro (De vita populi romani, On the Life of the Roman People).

At the same time, it is another topos in scholarship to point out that scholarly attention has been slow to follow the genre’s increasing popularity. This observation has also been made for ancient biography in particular. In his monograph on this ancient genre, for example, the late Tomas Hägg (2012a: x) notes that it is one of the more neglected fields in classical studies. There is, of course, much work on individual biographies (e.g. Demoen

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1 In fact, Dicaearchus himself is said (by D.L. 3.4) to have used the same label also for the title of his collection of Lives of philosophers (Peri biōn, On Lives; Fortenbaugh and Schütrumpf 2001: 52). Averintsev (2002: 19–21) discusses the meanings of the Greek word bios (as opposed to zōē).

2 On this discrepancy, see Nadel (1984: 1), Madelénat (1984: 13), Kendall (1965: 5), and Backscheider (1999: xiv), of which the last also gives further references.
and Praet 2009 on Philostratus’ Life of Apollonius), single authors (e.g. Pelling 2002a on Plutarch; Guijarro 2009 on Diogenes Laertius; and Bowie and Elsner 2009 on Philostratus), more or less rigidly defined sets of subgenres (e.g. P. Cox 1983 on spiritual biography in Late Antiquity; Kivilo 2010 on poets’ Lives; and Fletcher and Hanink 2016 on Lives of artists in general) and specific historical periods (e.g. Erler and Schorn 2007 on Hellenistic and Edwards and Swain 1997 on Roman Imperial biography). But most studies that aim to offer some comprehensiveness in their treatments of ancient biography more generally predate all this scholarship by several decades (e.g. Leo 1901; Stuart 1928; and, on autobiography, Misch 1949). The same can be said of studies that cover substantial parts of the genre (e.g. Hadas and Smith 1965 on spiritual biographies; Dorey 1967 on Latin and Dihle 1970 and Momigliano 1993 on Greek biography). Whereas recent years have witnessed the publication of broad, collective surveys on other ancient narrative prose genres such as historiography (Marincola 2007) and the novel (Whitmarsh 2008; Cueva and Byrne 2014), the present Handbook is the first such work on ancient biography.3

**Modern Criticism**

As an explanation for the lack of holistic focus in scholarship, some scholars have pointed to the fact that ancient biography as a whole is rather badly documented. Gallo (1995: 12; 2005: 10), for example, complains that we have almost no remaining biographies predating Plutarch.4 This is arguably an exaggeration, as this volume will go on to show, although much depends on how we define that term (a thorny question to which I return below). Another explanation focuses not so much on the quantity of what remains as on its perceived quality. As Sonnabend (2002: 1–4) explains, the genre has received a particularly bad press. First, ancient biography clearly cannot be adequately described using the traditional, formal genre categories.5 Like most other prose genres, it famously differs from the major genres in verse, such as epic, lyric, and tragedy, in that we do not have ancient generic theory on it or any other trace that would suggest that it ever had its own consolidated set of guidelines, prescriptions, or ‘poetics’ in Antiquity. This observation has even led scholars to think of it as a ‘minor’ or ‘marginal’ genre (Kleinliteratur), as opposed to more elevated and refined literature (belles lettres or Hochliteratur).6

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3 For medieval biography in the Latin West, on the contrary, there is Berschin’s monumental study in five volumes (1986–2004).
4 Similarly, but more specifically on Hellenistic biography, see Bonazzi and Schorn (2016: 8).
6 For example, Gallo (1995: 9) on ancient biography never having been a ‘genere alto’ (Plutarch being the sole exception), Gallo (2005: 13) on this genre as ‘letteratura di consumo’, Efthymiadis (2014c: 5) on pre-Christian biography as marginal, Momigliano (1993: 9) on pre-Constantinian biography as relatively unimportant, Thorsen and Harrison (2018: 1) on biography often being perceived as one of the ‘lowest’ genres and Frickenschmidt (1997: 27–28) on the contrast between ancient biography and so-called Hochliteratur.
Ancient biographies share this fate with another prose genre that does not seem to have come with its own theoretical conceptualizations in Antiquity and was equally often neglected or treated dismissively in twentieth-century scholarship: the ancient novel. This genre too has been critically rehabilitated only relatively recently, but in the case of ancient biography, the rehabilitation has been more uneven, as some biographers have tended to miss out on the general reappraisal more than others. Another similarity is that scholarship on ancient biography too tends to recognize modern counterparts as the norm, while characterizing ancient (and medieval) texts as 'forerunners' rather than full-blown representatives of an ancient genre in their own right (see also Hägg 2012a: 1-2 on this trend). The language of origin, evolution, and progression underlying such genealogies, as if there is a clear line running from exemplary or idealizing ancient Lives to realistic ones of the eighteenth century, has been rightly criticized (e.g. by H. Lee 2009: xiv). Nevertheless, in many histories of the genre, typically a few ancient biographers (usually including Plutarch and Suetonius) are singled out, whereas most forms of ancient biographical narrative are not dealt with at all (e.g. Madelénat 1984; Parke 2002; Hamilton 2007; Gillies 2009; Klein 2009).

It is not just that biographies have long been characterized by modern scholars as marginal, relatively unimportant, or less developed than their modern counterparts. It is also that they have been criticized for their perceived lack of historical precision. One of the most famous examples of this attitude is Theodor Mommsen (1890: 229), who criticizes the lack of historical reliability in the Historia Augusta and labels this text 'one of the most wretched mess-ups' ('eine der elendsten Sudeleien') that have come down to us from Antiquity. His characterization is emblematic of a broader concern with biography's position 'between historical writing and belles lettres' (Kendall 1965: 3) as it has traditionally been perceived: scholars long required biography to be a truthful representation of historical reality. This requirement typically activated a set of expectations, such as that of completeness, citation of sources, first-hand knowledge of the biographer, and objectivity.8

Ancient biography too has been read as a form of history9—with notable consequences. As Hägg (2011: 17-18) explains, scholars have long kept ancient biographies 'proper' separated from 'other' narratives because of their belief that historical accuracy and factual truth are essential in the former and, therefore, should act as genre-distinctive criteria. At the same time, others have rightly suggested that we cannot simply retroject such modern requirements onto the ancient material and that the relationship between biography and history is more complex. In fact, ancient biography often shows an awareness of its own generic position in relation to history—a topic explored by S. Adams in Chapter 2 in this volume, and further picked up by R. Stem in Chapter 11.10 Rather than simply being a

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7 See De Temmerman (2014: 17-18) on this change in critical attitude from, roughly speaking, the 1990s onwards.


9 Güthenke (2016) is insightful on how nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars of ancient biography (e.g. Bruns 1896; Leo 1901; Misch 1949) project modern concerns (i.e. about fictionality and historiography) onto their research object.

10 F. Doufikar-Aerts, for her part, draws attention to a quite different approach to distinguishing history from biography in the Arabic tradition of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages (Chapter 33 in this volume).
subgenre of history, it has been pointed out, biography operates under generic parameters of its own and is generally not concerned with sustained historical veracity (e.g. P. Cox 1983: 5 on spiritual biography). On the contrary, modes of emplotment and conventional structures of fiction are operative in it and make it a creative and meaningful literary form rather than, simply, a recorder of historical fact (e.g. Nadel 1984: 8 and, for ancient biography specifically, De Temmerman 2016). In fact, the common motif in biographies and encomia to compare a literary work to a painting and sculpture may invite us to reflect on aspects of biography such as flatness, idealization, flatness, inaccuracy, and distortion, all of which may very well have been intrinsic to the ancient concept, even if they have not always been recognized as such by modern scholars.11

As a result, more open views have recently been applied to the concept of biography (McGing and Mossman 2006; H. Lee 2009; Hägg 2012a; De Temmerman and Demoen 2016; Fletcher and Hanink 2016; Cairns and Luke 2018a), allowing, for example, the inclusion of Lives of saints,12 legendary heroes (such as Aesop), and fictionalized, historical figures (such as Ps.-Callisthenes’ Alexander). This volume also includes such Lives (e.g. Chapters 4, 16, 27, 28) and, in addition, addresses various other kinds of overlap between ancient biography and fiction (e.g. Chapter 9 on Xenophon, Chapter 24 on political biography, Chapter 30 on fictional autobiography in Syriac, Chapter 34 on fictionalizing dynamics in ancient Egyptian biographical monuments, and Chapter 38 on the biographic in Byzantine fiction). In this book, in other words, we depart from what has long been an essential assumption underlying quite a few modern definitions of the genre of biography, i.e. that it tells the life story of a historical individual (rather than a fictional one; Madelénat 1984: 20; Hägg 2012a: ix). This assumption is in need of revision, as it is arguably a remnant of our modern characterization of biography as a provider of historical truth. Indeed, modern readers have an acute awareness that the content of, say, Joann F. Price’s Barack Obama: A Biography (2008) is ontologically very different from that of books that have formally similar titles but are, in fact, either acknowledged fictions cast in the form of biographies (e.g. Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyitch or Nabokov’s The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, which are built around invented characters)13 or biographical novels (e.g. Allan Massie’s Tiberius, Hilary Mantel’s Wolf Hall, or, to take an ancient example, Ps.-Callisthenes’ Alexander Romance, which are concerned with historical characters but invent plotlines around them and/or do not necessarily relate to existing traditions). But for some ancient Lives included in this Handbook, it is not even clear to us whether their subjects ever were historical persons—and it may not have been any clearer to an ancient audience. The fabulist Aesop and the philosopher Demonax (whose Lives were labelled as Bioi in Antiquity and are dealt with in Chapters 4 and 17 respectively in this volume), for example, cannot be said with any certainty to have existed (though they probably did, as

11 H. Lee (2009: 3). T.E. Duff (1999: 16 n. 9) gives references to the ancient texts. See also P. Cox (1983: xi–xvi) on biographers as painters not of landscape but of character—the ‘inscape’—and on the exaggeration, typification, stylization, and idealization that come with it. Licona (2017: 198–199) compares writing biography to editing photographs (e.g. adding haze) to make the same point: that the ancient genre did not have the same preoccupation with precision as we have today.


13 See Cohn (1999: 18–30) on this distinction.
G. Anderson assumes for Demonax in this volume) and we can only speculate about how ancient readers would have approached their Lives. It is equally unclear to what extent Jerome (or his readers) was (were) convinced that his Lives of Paul the First Hermit and Malchus dealt with historical figures. And what to think of the Byzantine Life (and Martyrdom) of Galaction and Episteme (BHG 665–666)? Its male protagonist is presented as the son of Clitophon and Leucippe, the hero and heroine of Achilles Tatius’ novel from the middle of the first century (Robiano 2009). He is therefore paraded as being the product—quite literally—of a piece of fiction. In short, positing the historicity of biographers as a criterion for defining biography is not justified by the extant ancient material.

**Defining Biography**

Another explanation for the dearth of holistic focus in scholarship on ancient biography points to the difficulty of defining the notoriously diverse genre (Cairns and Luke 2018: vii). Indeed, it is difficult to study something in its totality if we do not know (or widely disagree about) what exactly that totality is. Our modern English term, to begin with, does not help much, as it is far from unambiguous. It goes back to the Greek ‘βιογραφία’ (biographia), which postdates by centuries most of the material with which this Handbook is concerned. It first appears in fragments of Damascius’ Life of Isidore of Alexandria (end of the fifth or first half of the sixth century AD) preserved in Photius’ Bibliotheca (cod. 181, 242; ninth century), where it refers to the written production (graphein) of a story of one’s life (bios). In English, it is picked up in John Dryden’s introduction to his translation of Plutarch’s Lives (1683), where it has the same literary connotation, which is subsequently consolidated throughout the remainder of the seventeenth century and beyond—a written record of one’s life (rather than, say, a more general depiction of human life and experience across different media; Hamilton 2007: 2–3). The same connotation remains dominant in modern-day usage of the word as attested in dictionaries such as the Oxford English Dictionary (1971) or the New Oxford Dictionary of English (2001). At the same time, the English term has been polysemic since its coinage: an umbrella term that can denote widely different types of life-writing; not only Lives in both prose and verse, but also encyclopaedia entries, epitaphs, *libri de viris illustribus*, letters, and *laudationes*.

It comes as no surprise, then, that opinions vary on how precisely to define biography as a part of ancient textual production. It never was a rigidly defined genre, and much ink has

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16 *OED*: ‘(1) The history of the lives of individual men, as a branch of literature; (2) A written record of the life of an individual’; *NODE*: ‘An account of someone’s life written by someone else.’

flowed over the question of what it was (and what it was not). It is a recurrent pattern that modern definitions tend to impose boundaries which do not seem to be justified by the ancient material, which is too sprawling and diverse to be captured under one single definition unless a very general one. Momigliano’s influential definition as ‘an account of the life of a man from birth to death’ (1993: 11) illustrates this very well. It is, first, too broad to be workable, as it includes, strictly speaking, any given epitaph that states that a person has lived a certain amount of time—something few readers would call a biography (Ehlers 1998). In an attempt to be more precise, Dihle (1987: 8–9) adds specific criteria, such as a view of one’s life in its totality and a moral purpose. This concept of a ‘core genre’ is designed to identify texts that best meet specific criteria and distinguish them from other texts (such as, in Dihle’s own view, Xenophon’s Agesilaus and Isocrates’ Evagoras, which he labels as encomia rather than biographies). But it is methodologically unhelpful: it is conducive to identifying some of the extant material as ‘real’ biographies while branding the rest as less central (or less successful). Moreover, since such identifications are always (and inevitably) based on a pre-selected sample of texts, they are particularly prone to circular reasoning. Burridge (2018: 124–149), for example, identifies five texts as biographies (Isocrates’ Evagoras, Xenophon’s Agesilaus, Satyrus’ Euripides, Nepos’ Atticus, and Philo’s Moses) and excludes Xenophon’s Memorabilia because it is too long, has philosophical dialogue, and lacks chronology (ibid.: 149). But, as Edwards (1997b: 230) astutely points out, this line of thought imposes the expectation on the genre while claiming that the genre has defined the expectations: had Memorabilia been included in the sample at the outset, Burridge’s inference could not follow.

Yet, for all its breadth, Momigliano’s definition is at the same time too specific to fit much of the extant material: it is challenged by all Lives of women (explicitly addressed in Chapters 30 and 37 in this volume); by all Lives that give no information about the birth or death of their subjects or, indeed, creatively reshuffle these topics, such as Porphyry’s Life of Plotinus (Chapter 26), which starts not with the birth but with the death of its protagonist (2, Edwards 2000b); and by all Lives that are either ordered by principles other than (mere) chronology (e.g. Suetonius’ Lives of the Caesars, Chapter 15) or do not always encompass the full chronological range that Momigliano implies (e.g. Nepos’ On Foreign Generals, Chapter 3). Hägg (2012a: ix) sensibly allows for more flexibility by defining biography as a story of one’s life ‘from cradle to grave (or a substantial part of it)’ but H. Lee (2009: 8) rightly points to the fundamental problem: this requirement has been so often broken in

19 See Zymner (2009: 8–11) for a number of definitions. Similarly, modern taxonomies that establish different subtypes of biography (historical, literary, fictional, etc.), such as that of Parke (2002: 29–30), do not fit the ancient material either.
20 The term was coined by Pausch (2004: 43–44: ‘Kerngattung’).
21 Other examples of such restrictive and methodologically unsound views of what a ‘real’ ancient biography is (not) or ought (not) to be, are Momigliano (1993: 17), whose definition (cited above) excludes Plato’s Apology and Xenophon’s Apology and Memorabilia from being ‘full biographies’; and Arrigetti (1964: 11), who labels as ‘real’ biographies only those which have ‘their only reason for being’ (‘la loro unica ragione d’essere’) in biographical research and exposition (‘nella ricerca e nell’esposizione biografica’), and on this (unverifiable) ground disqualifies Satyrus’ Life of Euripides.
the history of life-writing as not to count at all. Although many ancient biographies surely capitalize on birth and death episodes as significant ingredients,22 others are often selective in which episodes they emphasize (and which they treat briefly or ignore altogether). And, of course, attitudes towards coverage are themselves subject to change over time: whereas Antiquity arguably saw attention to public achievement as a major ingredient of life-writing, modern biographers may cater more to readers’ taste for psychological dissection of one’s inner life.23

Titles of works as they have come down to us through the editorial tradition are not of much help either. Some works featuring the word bios in their titles, such as Lucian’s Life of Demonax (Chapter 17 in this volume) or the anonymous Life of Secundus the Philosopher (Chapter 4), are not biographies in any strict sense of the word but resonate widely with other genres, such as encomium, recollections, and collections of sayings. And though all ancient and late antique works entitled as bioi do share not only their title but also a number of characteristics,24 Edwards (1997b: 230) rightly points out that, if one were to take these characteristics as criteria for a definition of biography, numerous other important representatives of commemorative ancient life-writing would be excluded altogether (e.g. Suetonius’ Lives of the Caesars, the gospels, Eusebius’ Life of Constantine, Iamblichus’ On the Pythagorean Life and Porphyry’s Life of Plotinus).

Given the fuzziness surrounding both the term and the concept of biography in Antiquity, scholars have been creative in finding metaphors to conceptualize its slipperiness. Hägg (2012a: xi), for example, warns, no doubt rightly, that it may be pointless to draw ‘borders where the authors themselves so obviously moved over mapless terrain’. D. Praet (Chapter 27 in this volume) suggests, therefore, replacing the spatial metaphor by one of music, ‘where certain themes are repeated but with new material and variations on old themes, played with different instruments, sampled and remastered, and so on’. And Burridge (2018: 38) draws on Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblances to allow similar flexibility: in his view, gospels would have been recognized by ancient readers as (belonging to the family of) bioi because they have a number of characteristics in common with other works labelled as bioi.25

Other scholars have gone further and suggested that the common notion of ‘genre’ is less than adequate to capture the subtleties and complexities of ancient biographical narrative. C. Pelling, for example, is explicit that ‘one should not think of a single “biographical genre” with acknowledged conventions, but rather of a complicated picture of overlapping

22 On (life and) death in biographical traditions of Archaic philosophers, for example, see Chitwood (2004).
23 See, for example, Backscheider (1999: xvi) on the modern biographer ‘getting to the person beneath, the core of the human being’ and France and St Clair (2002: 1) on one’s ‘inner truth’ becoming important in biographical writing from Rousseau’s Les Confessions onwards.
24 These are, according to Edwards (1997b: 230): all events pertain to the life of a single character; the narrative follows a chronological order from birth or infancy to death; and the primary intention of the work is to judge rather than to inform. Examples are Nepos’ Lives of Illustrious Men, Plutarch’s Parallel Lives, Philostratus’ Lives of the Sophists, Diogenes Laertius’ Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Damascius’ Life of Isidore, Lucian’s Life of Demonax, and the Life of Aesop.
traditions, embracing works of varying form, style, length, and truthfulness’. Similarly, Edwards and Swain (1997) introduce the concept of ‘the biographic’: not so much a strictly delineated genre as a broader category, a trait, or set of traits present not just in biographies but also in a variety of other texts (Swain 1997: 1). In other words, ‘[j]ust as the tragic, ever since Aristotle, has been recognized as an element in literature that is not simply identical with the content of a tragedy, so we would contend that the biographic is’ (Edwards 1997b: 227). This allows the net to be cast much more widely and invites the inclusion as representatives of ‘the biographic’ of texts that have traditionally been labelled as generically hybrid (e.g. Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius*) and other works that are neither histories nor biographies in any strict sense (e.g. Aristides’ *Sacred Orations*, Arrian’s *Anabasis*, certain speeches of Dio and Lucian, and the correspondence of Cyprian, Julian, Basil, Augustine, and Jerome).

Swain and Edwards’ concept is helpful in analysing how biographical tendencies ‘invade’ (Edwards 1997b: 227) other forms of writing. Indeed, the (open) approach taken in this Handbook owes much to it. Xenophon of Athens’ *Cyropaedia* (fourth century bc), for example, is routinely cited as (one of) the first representative(s) of ancient biography, but a number of more or less contemporary, encomiastic, and other writings, such as his *Memorabilia* and *Ageisilus*, Isocrates’ *Evagoras*, and Plato’s *Apology* and *Phaedo*, are also informed to varying degrees by modes of writing that had an important role to play in later biographical discourse (Hägg 2012a: 19–66)—even though few would simply label them ‘biographies’. Conversely, the modern label of ‘fictional biographies’ (Karla 2009b) is routinely used to denote a range of the most disparate (pagan and early Christian) narratives from the first few centuries of the Common Era that consciously seem to draw upon a number of protocols from biography but at the same time are much more diffuse forms of story-telling than biographies strictly defined (*Life of Aesop*, *Alexander Romance*, apocryphal acts of the apostles, etc.).

Yet, I am not quite ready to give up on ‘genre’ as a critical concept altogether. One of the problems with the notion of ‘the biographic’ is that it seems difficult to see ‘where to stop’: in fact, if one were to make a Handbook of ‘the biographic’ in Antiquity, it would have to cover even broader sweeps of ancient literature than we have already done here. (On its current scope, see the section ‘Rationale Behind the Book’.) Biographical vignettes or more or less elaborate and/or evaluative sketches of characters abound in many ancient literary genres—from philosophical treatises and oratory over historiography and letter-writing to novels—and although Swain (1997: 36) is surely right that both biography and the

26 *OCD*, s.v. ‘biography, Greek’, 232.
27 See already Gallo (1995: 9) in passing on this distinction. The main characteristics of ‘the biographic’, as identified by Edwards, are that the authors are almost always partisan, the tone of the writings is often panegyrical, polemical, or apologetical, many are written by an intimate, or at least a contemporary, of the subject, many are argumentative and use strategies to enhance their veracity, and accounts of the subject’s birth and infancy will often be miraculous.
28 Morales (2009) points to the inadequacy of current generic categories to capture these texts.
biographic are much more frequent in the literature of the Roman Empire and Late Antiquity than in previous eras, there remains much earlier material that would also merit being included.\footnote{Frickenschmidt (1997: 192–209) discusses pockets of biographical narrative (‘einen repräsentativen kurzen Lebensquerschnitt’) from the Old Testament onwards and identifies biographical data collections that he sees as fundamental to more extended biographies (of which he identifies no fewer than 142; ibid.: 79–80). On biographical interests in the Old Testament, see also Baltzer (1975: 19–105).} Our book, on the other hand, as a rule, covers texts that are recognizable in themselves as pieces of (either individual or collective) life-writing.\footnote{I have not included histories of peoples, such as Gregory of Tours’ History of the Franks (which Kendall 1965: 41–49 includes in his discussion of ‘biography’ in Antiquity and the Middle Ages).} I have not, that is, attempted to include every biographical sketch or every instance of biographical modes of discourse in historiography, epic, epistolography, and other genres (which would be possible only in a multi-volume series), although such biographical material does feature in some individual chapters (and even has a prominent role to play in Part V).

In addition, even if we accept the concept of the biographic as a real and important one (as I do), this still leaves intact the notion that genre has or can have a role to play in how readers respond to Lives (a view also held by S. Adams in Chapter 2 in this volume). As McGing and Mossman (2006b: x) rightly note, ‘some Lives inevitably activate some generically-inspired expectations which are more precise than Edwards’ concept allows’.\footnote{See also P. Cox (1983: xiii, 55) on the continuity of generic features in ancient biography from the fifth century BC onwards and on the concept of genre as important for associating several literary works while allowing for individual variations, and as ‘a cluster of defining traits that both shapes and distinguishes one group of literary works from another’. Comparably, Adams’ (2013) underlying premise is that determining the genre of a work is fundamental to its interpretation.}

And, in fact, some ancient authors reflect on how they inscribe themselves in the distinctive practice of writing bioi (Papaconstantinou 2010). Similarly, Swain (1997: 1–2) recognizes the category of genre to some extent when he defines biographies as ‘texts which furnish detailed accounts of individuals’ lives’ and which may be ‘complete, from birth to death, or sectional and partial’. Urbano (2013: 16–17) extends this definition to Late Antiquity to include not only bioi but also philosophical history, early forms of hagiography, and funeral orations, thus testifying to the sprawling nature of life-writing in that period.

It will be clear by now that in this Handbook I do not conceive of ancient biography in terms of a checklist of essential, generic features. Since biography in its broadest sense is really just an extended, written account of the life (or parts thereof) of a given (real or fictional) individual (or group of individuals), it does not have specific formal characteristics that allow us to build a solid set of criteria. I have therefore chosen a workable middle ground between inappropriately rigid, generic essentialism and indefinite openness. In practice, this means that, starting from the observation that from the earliest representatives onwards, Lives, to varying degrees, share features with other (contemporary, earlier or later) genres, such as history, encomia or novels, the book includes quite a few texts that have traditionally not been included in the biographical canon: gospels (Chapter 6), for instance, following Burridge (2018), Frickenschmidt (1997), Keener and Wright (2016) and Licona (2017: 9–22); Tacitus’ Agricola (Chapter 12), though that text can just as well be read (and has been) as an encomium, funerary oratory, ethnography, and history (Whitmarsh 2006); the Life of Secundus, the Tale of Ahiqar (both in Chapter 4) and the Alexander...
Romance (Chapter 16), which all have (rightly) been included also in a recent Encyclopedia of the Novel (Selden 2014). With others, in short, I conceptualize biography in this Handbook as a flexible, open, and fluid genre, which allows, accommodates, and even stimulates experiments with its own characteristics, story-patterns, and borders. Of course, authors of individual chapters will come back to more specific questions of definition and genre with a view to the texts that they discuss.

‘Origins’

Just as scholars do not agree about what ancient biography is, they also do not agree, unsurprisingly, about how, when, and where it originated—and I return below to my own scepticism about the possibility of answering this question at all. Diachronic surveys of the genre sometimes look to the ancient Near East for so-called ‘predecessors’ or ‘precursors’—although C. Pelling (Chapter 7 in this volume) is surely right to note the fundamental, methodological problems intrinsic to such teleological language. In any case, it remains valid to note that commemorative inscriptions in the Babylonian and Assyrian kingdoms (third millennium to the sixth century BC) provide early textual expressions of a biographical interest (Maul 1998; Parke 2002: xxii–xxviii; Madelénat 1984: 37–42), and E. Frood (Chapter 34 in this volume) and C. Schuler and F.R. Forster (Chapter 35) explore similar instances of such an interest in ancient Egypt and Rome and Greece respectively. In addition, scholars have also noted (or, given the absence of much early evidence, hypothesized) a strong biographical flavour in oriental tales going back all the way to the Gilgamesh epos, and they have examined (or speculated about) whether and how such tales (e.g. the story of Ahiqar or oriental versions of the Seven Wise Men) may have impacted Greek story-telling in Asia Minor from a relatively early stage onwards.

But it is in the Hellenistic era that for a long time scholars located the earliest ‘proper’ Greek biographies—which is a bit of a paradox, to be sure, since not a single complete biography has survived from that era (see Chapter 10 in this volume for details). At that time, so the traditional argument goes, the increased significance of individuals in large-scale political structures (Einzelpersönlichkeiten, as opposed to the small-scale, collectiveness of the polis in the Classical period) was conducive to an interest in biographical writing, first about politicians but soon also about poets, scholars, and philosophers. Leo (1901), for example, has famously claimed that biography originates as a product of Peripatetic schools. His argument builds on the demonstrable interest of Aristotelians both in anecdotes illustrating virtues and vices and in the description and evaluation of individual writers and philosophical schools. He distinguishes two branches of biographical development (Leo 1901: 1–16, 85–135, 146–192, 315–323): one branch invented by an early Peripatetic, possibly Aristoxenus, to tell the lives of statesmen (and generals) in straightforward,

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33 For example, Hägg (2012a) and McGing and Mossman (2006), the latter of whom explore some of the borderlands of this ‘messy’ genre. See also Pausch (2004: 46) on biography as an ‘open’ genre.
34 See Momigliano (1993: 35) and Gallo (2005: 20–21) on these stories; and Chapter 7 in this volume for further discussion.
chronological accounts, as exemplified by Plutarch in the later tradition; and another branch combining chronological accounts with systematic, thematic arrangements in order to highlight the character and achievements of individuals. The latter type, exemplified by Suetonius in the later tradition, was initially established, Leo submits, by Alexandrian grammarians under the influence of Peripatetic teaching in order to write the Lives of writers and artists.

As is well known, Leo’s thesis has met with substantial criticism. Crucially, not much of his argument is supported by textual evidence. Leo rather retrojects characteristics of later texts (notably Plutarchan and Suetonian) into a Hellenistic past. It is not just that connections are sometimes tenuous at best; it is also that such retrojections are methodologically problematic in principle. In fact, Leo’s genealogy of a bifurcated tradition is complicated by some of the little Hellenistic material that we do have, such as the papyrus of Satyrus (Florentine, E18411) and the Suda’s note on the Life of Empedocles. We know next to nothing about these authors or the contents of their works—not even enough to be confident, in fact, that Scylax’ account of Heraclides was ‘some sort of biographical work’, as Momigliano (1993: 29) puts it. But the fact that all three authors have traditionally been located at the margins of Greek culture (one in the West and two in the East) feeds into the idea of biography being a culturally hybrid form of writing.

For all the criticism that Leo’s thesis has encountered, his basic idea that biography originated in the context of philosophical schools has been shared by others. Dihle (1970: 13–34), for example, places the rise of the genre in the Academy, where, he argues, the (memory of the) charismatic personality of Socrates provided the impetus for biographical writing. Following others, Dihle (ibid.: 35–56) identifies as an important factor in this

36 See Momigliano (1993: 19–20), Frickenschmidt (1997: 28–31), and Gallo (2005: 15–19) for overviews of such criticism. In addition, less substantial nuances to Leo’s thesis are offered by Stuart (1928), suggesting not one founder but a group of Peripatetics, Steidle (1951), pointing not to Suetonius but to Nicolaus of Damascus as the first who took the so-called ‘Suetonian’ model into the political realm, and Krischer (1982), seeing Peripatetic biography not as a genre, among others.

37 Momigliano (1993: 113–115) is surely right that it is difficult to see what was specifically Aristotelian in the Suetonian type.


40 See Gallo (1995: 16) and Gera (1993: 3) for details.

41 Such as Bruns (1896: 46), who claims that biography originates as a result of the appearance of strong individuals/personalities in specific historical periods.
development a wider cultural interest in individuality as it is attested by, among other things, an anecdotic interest in famous people (popular books and legends about Homer and Hesiod, Aesop, Archilochus, Sappho, etc.), comprehensive assessments of prominent people in historical works, encomia, and Socratic literature. In Dihle’s view, Plato’s *Apology* is the earliest model of Greek biography (ibid.: 13), whereas Aristotle’s *Ethics* influenced later Lives and the Peripatos formalized the tradition (ibid.: 57–87). Whereas it is true that Plato’s *Apology*, like Xenophon’s Socratic writings, contains elements that became standard features of later biographies (as P. Cox 1983: 7 points out), Dihle’s basic assumption that biography needs an exceptional, authoritative figure to flourish has (rightly) been doubted.

A number of other genres and writing practices have also been suggested to have played a role in the early development of biography. The *Odyssey*, for example, must have had an influence on early biographers, such as Stesimbrotus and Ion (Dormeyer 2009); Hellenistic philological commentaries and surveys have been said to evince biographical interests (Momigliano 1993: 13–14); Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon’s historiographical writings clearly accommodate biographical material (see Chapter 7 in this volume on the first two, and Chapter 9 on the last); funeral orations have been supposed to play a role too, both in fifth-century Greece (Momigliano 1993: 24) and in Republican Rome (Stuart 1928: 209–220; Brugnoli 1995: 82–86; Sonnabend 2002: 87–88); and, of course, the rhetorical tradition of the prose encomium (of which Isocrates formalizes the first model in his depiction of the ideal monarch in *Evagoras*; Chapter 8 in this volume) shares important features with later key-texts of the ancient biographical tradition (P. Cox 1983: 8; Sonnabend 2002: 32–41). Finally, scholars have also attempted to reconstruct from supposed later examples (e.g. Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius*) a (biographical) genre called ‘aretalogy’, which allegedly documented miracles and extraordinary achievements of deities and semi-divine characters (Hadas and Smith 1965)—more recently, others have adduced sensible criticism as to whether we really have to hypothesize the existence of such a genre in the first place (P. Cox 1983: 46–51; Haase 2006).

## Rationale Behind the Book

The question of ‘origins’ is not one that this Handbook sets out to answer. Indeed, it is so much bound up with that of definition that we may very well be sceptical about the possibility of answering it at all. As we have seen, the only productive definition of ancient biography is a very loose and general one. And, of course, the more open and inclusive we allow it to be, the less possible it becomes to formulate a sensible answer to the question of origins and development—and, indeed, the less meaningful such an answer could possibly be. The volume’s cross-cultural and cross-linguistic inclusiveness drives this

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42 See also Görgemanns (1997).
43 As Krischer (1982: 63–64) and Gentili and Cerri (1988: 80–81) point out, it can just as well take its inspiration from the exemplary realization of general virtues and vices.
44 Whitmarsh (2018: xii) develops this argument for the ancient novel, which, like biography, can, in his view, be defined only very loosely (‘an extended fictional story in prose’).
point home. Part IV includes chapters on late antique forms of life-writing in important traditions other than Latin and Greek: Syriac (the third largest surviving literature of Late Antiquity), Coptic, Armenian, and Arabic. Of course, cross-cultural exchange in all these fields has been widely documented, but the mere fact that all these traditions articulate life-writing along very similar, formal lines does not mean, of course, that they must be related to each other in terms of (direct or indirect) contact. In his history of the novel, Moretti (2006: vol. 1: section 2) speaks of ‘polygenesis’, which means that across different cultures similar or identical practices (can) arise independently from each other. Surely, telling and writing stories about the lives of important or inspiring (groups of) individuals are more likely to be sensibly conceptualized along these lines than in terms of developmental history. There is much truth in Bowie and Harrison’s (1993: 173) statement that the question of the ‘origins’ of the ancient novel, once thought to be the only one worth pursuing, is ‘an insoluble and vain enquiry’, and it is difficult to see why this would be any different for ancient biography, which is a kind of narrative just as sprawling and difficult to define.

Moreover, the long-standing scholarly focus on the question of ‘origins’ (together with that on historicity and authenticity) has long kept scholars away from the approach adopted in this Handbook: to read ancient biographies as narrative and textual constructs in their own right. Good examples of this—fairly recent—trend are B. Graziosi’s (2002) book on the Lives of Homer, and Fletcher and Hanink’s (2016) volume on Lives of poets and artists: they draw attention to the relevance of biographical traditions as creative reworkings of earlier traditions—an outlook that surely can be extrapolated to biographies other than those examined by these authors. This is not to say, of course, that all contributors in this Handbook will address this one question; rather, like these authors, they pay attention, first and foremost, to issues of textuality and narrativity underlying the texts. In this sense, this Handbook does not want to replace the standard works of Leo, Dihle, or Momigliano, but rather aims to add perspectives and, in some cases, raise questions that have received less attention so far.

This volume also takes a rather open approach in another area: that of chronology. Most current studies on the genre do not venture beyond the first couple of centuries of the Common Era (which constitute the genre’s best-documented period). This Handbook modestly broadens the temporal span and includes late antique forms of biographical narrative, albeit not exhaustively, of course: it covers, in Parts II and III, much of the field up to the fourth century AD (when Christian life-writing becomes too frequent and omnipresent to be sensibly contained and discussed within the limits of this one book) and occasionally discusses relevant material also from later in the early Byzantine period (and, more rarely, beyond), notably in Parts III and IV, with chapters on, for example, Christian martyrs (Chapter 28), monks (Chapter 29), and eastern traditions (Chapters 30–33). The book thus builds on the insight that late antique biographies continue important aspects of the

45 Yolles and Weiss (2018), for example, on the biographical tradition of Muhammad as it evolves in the Latin, medieval West. See the relevant chapters for other bibliography.
46 The concept is inspirational for Whitmarsh (2018) to discuss the genealogy of the Greek love novel.
47 Hägg (2006) applies the concept of polygenesis to some texts that have their place in this Handbook (e.g. Philostratus’ Life of Apollonius, the apocryphal acts of the apostles, the Alexander Romance, and the Life of Aesop).
ancient biographical tradition (P. Cox 1983; Edwards and Swain 1997; Hägg and Rousseau 2000; Van Hoof 2018). The field most affected by this chronological scope is, of course, Christian life-writing.\(^{48}\) Lives of saints, just like the gospels (Burridge 2006; 2018), are separated from biography mainly by very slippery and vague conceptual boundaries (Van Uytfanghe 2001; Burrus 2004; Hägg 2011). This does not mean, of course, that I promote the view that narrative texts as diverse as philosophers’ Lives, political biographies, panegyrics, funeral orations, Christian martyr acts, and saints’ Lives should all be chalked down simply as ‘biographies’. Rather, all these types of narrative commemorate, document, or purport to document Lives, achievements, and/or deaths and build to some extent on biographical protocols, topoi, and narrative strategies; this Handbook aims to explore how exactly they adopt, adapt, rework, and recycle them.

Another road to expand the study of ancient biography, both in chronological and cross-cultural terms, is taken in Part VI, which deals with the reception of ancient biography from the Middle Ages onwards. Although this topic has become increasingly popular in scholarship on specific authors over the last few years,\(^{49}\) general surveys of the ancient genre usually do not include it. The same is true also for the final area where I have tried to approach life-writing more openly than earlier overviews have done: that of media. Although the bulk of this volume deals with literature, Part V pays attention to representations of lives (or parts thereof) in other media. Epigraphical sources, for example, present important, topical aspects of the lives of historical persons that also receive attention in biographical narrative literature: birth, youth, death, etc. (Baslez 1993; Alföldy 2005; Errington 2005). In addition, inscriptions were used as a source of evidence not just of an individual’s actions but also of his/her moral qualities—another important resonance with biographical writing (e.g. Low 2016 on Classical and Hellenistic Greece, and C. Schuler and F.R. Forster in Chapter 35 in this volume on both Greece and Rome). Similarly, different types of visual art, such as depictions of triumphs, feature important achievements, another well-known topos in biography. Therefore, attention will be paid to specific ways in which such biographical aspects are represented.

For the conceptual openness and generic inclusiveness underlying this volume, there is one obvious price to pay: they make exhaustiveness impossible, even across a total of 42 chapters. In order to at least ensure reasonable coverage of the extant material, I have distributed the lion’s share of the chapters over (the first) three parts. The introductory section (Part I) continues to deal with conceptual questions (Chapter 2) and subsequently offers a bird’s-eye view of traditions of which specific texts are discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters—individual and collective life-writing, popular, Jewish and Christian biography (Chapters 3–6). Part II, subsequently, offers readings of individual key texts. These are organized in a roughly chronological order and start from the fifth century BC up to the late fourth century AD. Part III, finally, steers away from questions about individual biographies to address broader issues: it accommodates chapters with a diachronic focus on specific types of biographees, such as statesmen, philosophers, and monks,

\(^{48}\) Even Hägg’s (2012a) admirably detailed, diachronic study covers the whole of early Christian biographical narrative in a single chapter (on the gospels) and an epilogue of ten pages.

\(^{49}\) See, for example, Hamilton (2007: 60–99) on ‘the Renaissance of biography’ and Jacobs (2018: 422–430) on the reception of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* in the western classical tradition.
all of whom are discussed through different, selected texts from the biographical tradition. K. Eshleman (Chapter 25), for example, explores, through two key texts, broader implications of life-writing of one type of biographee (reading, as she does, biographies of sophists as a cultural history of Hellenism).

The combined arrangement of overview chapters in Part I and both synchronic and diachronic readings in Parts II and III respectively should allow the most important representatives of the large biographical subgenres, such as political biography, biography of intellectuals (philosophers and sophists), and hagiography, to be covered, even if not every individual biography is dealt with in a chapter of its own. The *Historia Augusta*, for example, which is the most extensive late Roman biographical work and the object of renewed scholarly interest (Rohrbacher 2016; 2018; Savino 2017), is covered through the combined attention it receives in two chapters (15 and 24) alongside other texts. Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Macrina* is discussed as part of a broader chapter on Christian biography (Chapter 6), Athanasius’ foundational *Life of Antony* as part of one on monks (Chapter 29) and the *De viris illustribus* tradition surfaces in Chapters 19 and 40 (and some of its main representatives, such as Suetonius, Pliny, and Jerome do have chapters of their own). As for any Handbook, the index is therefore a crucial tool for readers interested in any given biography (or any topic, for that matter), as they are likely to find relevant information in different places.50

A final preliminary note is about the place of ancient autobiography in this book. Just as in the other areas of its conceptualization (and again following others, such as Momigliano 1993, Sonnabend 2002, and McGing and Mossman 2006), this Handbook does not posit any impermeable line between biography and autobiography. It rather builds on the similarities between the two kinds of writing more than on their differences (which are real enough, to be sure, and have been given more relative weight in other surveys, such as Marcus 1994: 1–10 and Hägg 2012a: ix). This means, in practice, that quite a few chapters discuss autobiographical alongside biographical narrative where appropriate for their individual purposes. (Again, the index allows for easy navigation.) Since, however, the huge majority of the book deals with biography (as we do not have that much ancient autobiographical material left in the first place), I have abstained from providing systematic, full coverage of autobiography as a separate topic or from thematizing it for its own sake (e.g. by including it in the book’s title or otherwise). Such a thematization would have taken the book in a different direction altogether, as it would have raised a whole range of specific, new questions about definition and narrative technique (e.g. on formal differences in narrating biographies and autobiographies) that really deserve to be covered in a book specifically on that topic.51

50 Inevitably, some texts have fallen out altogether, such as Julius Marathus’ biography of Augustus, of which no more than two fragments have come down to us. See Sonnabend (2002: 123–124).

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CHAPTER 2

WHAT ARE BIOI/VITAE?

Generic Self-Consciousness in Ancient Biography

SEAN A. ADAMS

What is genre? Or, more specifically for this chapter (and book): what is a biography? What might appear to be simple questions are inquiries that have engaged scholars and writers for millennia. In this chapter we will begin by discussing genre in general and biography in particular from an ancient perspective, attempting to develop an emic understanding of what distinguishes one genre from another. Having established that ancient authors recognized genre differences we will investigate how genre functions as a system, specifically focusing on genre hierarchies and relationships. Subsequently, we will turn our attention to biographies, how they related to the genre of history, and their presumed purpose and function. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of how biographers in Antiquity identified specific biographical conventions and identified themselves as members of this tradition.

WHAT IS THE ANCIENT UNDERSTANDING OF GENRE?

In order to understand the genre of ancient biography, it is necessary to understand how the ancients viewed genres, since their perspectives of biography shaped the construction of this genre form.¹ Although the lack of systematic study by the ancients prevents us from developing an exhaustive list of genre features, the components identified by these authors go a long way in the creation of our genre criteria. In our evaluation of authors we will see that they not only were aware of genres, but that they distinguished them by identifying

¹ Two points on the term ‘biography’ in this chapter need clarification. First, unless otherwise specified, the term biography refers to ancient biographies and not its modern counterpart. This holds for all other genre forms. Second, the sharing of a genre name across epochs (i.e., biography) does not necessitate or imply a sharing of genre features. These need to be decided according to era, geographic locale, and, sometimes, according to author.
genre-specific formal features. One of the challenges in focusing on biography is that the majority of ancient discussions of genre discussed poetic works (e.g. epic, tragedy, comedy) as these were more valued in literary culture than prose works. As a result, though biography is our ultimate focus, we will sometimes need to discuss other literary forms as their discussions will assist in our understanding.

First, genres are fundamentally split into two large divisions based on the use of metre: poetry and narrative. For, as Dionysius claims, ‘every utterance by which we express our thoughts is either in metre or not in metre’ (ὑ μέν ἐμετρος, ἡ δὲ ἀμετρος, Comp 3; cf. Philo, Opif. 4). Prose language was further divided into styles, which were thought to correspond to the subject and genre of the work. For example, prose was traditionally divided into three styles: high, middle, and low (or grand, middle, and plain; D.H. Dem. 1–3), though some ancients developed a four-part style division: grand, elegant, plain, and forceful (Phld. Rh. 1.165; Ps.-Demetr. Eloc. 36–304), while others had an even more complex system (cf. Hermog. Id.). For poetry, the ancients held that particular metres are lyrical representations of certain subjects and that it is a mistake not to pair a metre with its corresponding subject. For prose narratives, subject is not as explicitly tied to style, which can range within a genre form, though some pairings are more ‘proper’ than others (e.g. high style with history, D.H. Ant. Rom. 1.1.2).

The length of the work (μηκος) is also used to differentiate between genres, especially those that have other formal similarities (e.g. epic and tragedy, Arist. Po. 1449b11–16). Although it is difficult to prescribe a necessary size for any specific genre, it is apparent upon evaluating the lengths of particular works that a general range can be established. For prose, two genres are typically large in size: history and certain philosophical treatises. Medium-range genres include some philosophical treatises, novels, encomia, and individual biographies. Collected biographies display a range of lengths, medium to large, and while they form a literary whole, each large collected biography could be subdivided into smaller components that make the larger whole. For example, Diogenes Laertius’ Lives of Eminent Philosophers is comprised of ten books, each of which would be considered a medium-sized work on its own.

Potentially more important than metre and length for determining genre participation are subject matter and the intention of the work. According to Aristotle, Homer and Empedocles differ, not because of their metre, which is the same, but because of their chosen subject matter and intentions (Po. 1447b17–19). In the same vein, Aristotle also differentiates the historian from the poet, not merely by the use of prose or verse, but because the historian tells about what actually happened whereas the poet tells the sort of

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3 Arist. Po. 1459b31–8; Rh. 1404b12–21; D.H. Comp. 3; Phld. Po. 4.113.15–20; Prop. Elegy 2.1.39–42; 3.3.15–24; Ov. Fast. 2.125–126. Horace sees a strong connection between the subject matter of the work and the appropriate metre to be used (cf. Sat. 1.10.56–61). Metre and subject are closely linked and should not be experimented with. For example, ‘A theme for comedy refuses to be set forth in verses of tragedy’ (A.P. 89). Likewise, Horace implores, ‘Let each style keep the singular place for which it is suited’ (A.P. 92; Sat. 1.10.40–49; cf. Ov. Am. 1.11.1–4).

4 For definitions of size and more specific examples, see Adams (2013: 137–140). Xenophon’s Cyropaedia is a notable warning to enforce rigid distinctions.
thing that might happen (Po. 1451a38–b5). Biography and history are also differentiated by topic (see below), although genres that focus on an individual (e.g. encomium) are more difficult to distinguish from individual biography as they both focus on the life of an individual. These related literary forms naturally overlap, resulting in an overlapping spectrum of genres rather than a series of discrete literary types.

Regarding the variety of genre forms, Isocrates claims that there are as many branches of composition in prose as there are in poetry. Following this remark, Isocrates provides a brief typology of prose works, which include genealogies of demigods, studies of the poets, histories of war, and dialogue (Antid. 45–46). A similar categorization is located in Panathenaicus 1–2 where Isocrates names different categories of prose writing evident in his lifetime (e.g. genealogy, poetic commentary, military history, sophistic argument, legal texts, mythology, speeches, etc.). This is not a strict or rigid schema of genre. Rather, we see that, like the types of poetry, the ‘forms of prose’ (ἰδέας τῶν λόγων) are virtually innumerable and Isocrates has no intention of providing a full listing of them.

On the topic of genre development, Isocrates makes two comments that are important for this discussion. In Antidosis 1, he states that his speech is novel and unique in character, unlike any other. This novelty is based primarily on the selection of a subject which has not been attempted before (Antid. 3). Not only does Isocrates claim to have selected a new subject for this genre, he also pleads for the reader’s patience for a work with a ‘mixed discourse’ (μικτοῦ τοῦ λόγου) and multiple purposes (ὑποθέσεις, Antid. 12). The best-known passage of Isocrates for discussing genre development, however, is his claim in Evagoras 8:

> I am fully aware that what I propose to do is difficult—to eulogize in prose (διὰ λόγων ἐγκωμιάζειν) the virtues of a man. The best proof is this: those who devote themselves to philosophy venture to speak on many subjects of every kind, but no one of them has ever attempted to compose a discourse on such a theme (περὶ δὲ τῶν τοιούτων οἴδεις πώποτε αὐτῶν συγγράφειν ἐπεχείρησεν).

Not only does Isocrates show awareness of the prototypical features of encomium, he also displays a realization that he is intentionally breaking the traditional confines of that genre. This intentionality shows Isocrates’ ingenuity as an author and also provides an example of how genres develop. Further, that Isocrates felt free to expand existing generic boundaries indicates that biographical encomia allowed for generic adaptation and openness to non-prototypical features.

Related to Isocrates’ actions and important for this discussion is Philodemus’ claim that genres exist not by nature, but by convention, νόμοι (Po. 1.117.13–16). This reference to convention is essential as it indicates that at least one ancient explicitly understood genres as socially constructed entities. Though nature is necessary for the composition of poetry and other forms of literature, social convention provides the means by which genres are differentiated. Additionally, different cultures had different conventions, which result in the comparison of similar Greek and Latin genre forms by later authors.

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Overall, the ancients made specific reference to identifiable text components as earmarks for genres (metre, style, subject, length, structure, purpose, etc.). Not all genre features were equally weighted; certain elements were seen as more determinative of genre than others. Moreover, one feature was often insufficient to identify participation in a genre, as it could be used in more than one genre. Rather, multiple formal features were called upon to identify a work’s literary form.

**Genre Hierarchy and Relationships**

The relationship between genres, especially those that share a number of formal features, becomes increasingly important throughout the Hellenistic and Roman era. Genres did not exist in isolation from each other; rather, they existed within a system, with the importance of a particular genre directly related to its function and intentions.7 For Aristotle, this system needed to be strictly delineated and modeled on nature’s system of organization. Just as animal classifications were discrete, with each animal having its own category, so also each genre had its place and should not encroach upon the territory of other genres (Po. 1456a11–12).

The development of different genres gave rise to the notion of hierarchy, which became even more influential with the rise of literary canons. For example, Aristotle evaluated the three main genres (epic, tragedy, and comedy) and ranked them according to the criteria of length, metre, and dignity (Po. 1448b).8 Prose works were not debated, ranked, or focused on as much as their poetic counterparts, nor were they listed in hierarchical order. Consequently, understanding prose-genre hierarchies depends on dissecting dispersed authorial comments. One of the most comprehensive examples is the well-known discussion in *Institutio Oratoria* 10.1.1–131, in which Quintilian outlines representative authors for orators to read and ingest (cf. Inst. 1.8.5–8).9 The first observation we can make from his discussion is the comparative importance of poetic metre over that of prose. In all of the genre hierarchies available to us, we see that poetic genres receive pride of place and the majority of the discussion.10 Prose literature, when it is even discussed, is secondary and not as fully developed in terms of the number of genres examined. Second, when prose genres are discussed, the genre of history is the form typically mentioned and, when compared with other prose genres, is usually presented first.11 This preference indicates that, within prose works, history was the most respected genre, with the works of

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7 For further discussion, see Adams (2013: 49–53).
8 Ranking texts and authors was not uncommon in the Graeco-Roman literary world. See Cancik (2003), Ford (2002: 250–271), and Fowler (1982: 212–234).
9 Quintilian opens with a discussion of different poetry forms: hexameter (i.e., epic, tragedy, and comedy) and iambic (59–60), and lyric (61–64). Following this, Quintilian examines old comedy (65–66), tragedy (66–68), new comedy (69–72), history (73–75), oratory (76–80), and philosophy (81–84). This is immediately followed by a list of Roman authors according to the same categories.
11 Though see Cic. De Or. 4–6, who references poetry, philosophy, and oratory.
Thucydides, Herodotus, Sallust, and Livy presented as the pinnacle for Greek and Latin prose writings, setting the standard for subsequent writers.\textsuperscript{12}

One of the most striking features of the discussion of genre hierarchy and relationships is that mention of biography is practically non-existent. None of the major literary works that outline prose genres discuss the role of biography (e.g. Aristotle, Quintilian, Horace). Certain authors consider the role of encomium (e.g. Theon Prog. 109–112), but they are clearly not equating it with biography, nor do they discuss encomium in hierarchical terms. This omission is very telling for the place of biography within the genre hierarchy. First, its lack of discussion indicates that it is not a particularly important literary genre (at least at the time at which these hierarchies were being discussed). Second, the consistent mention of history implies that it was the dominant prose genre and so would have been the 'superior' genre in its relationship with biography. This will be further discussed below.

Although ancient literary culture as a whole shows certain trends in genre hierarchy, the formation of genre rankings was also personal, with each author having his or her own particular preferences. For instance, in Satire 1.4.24 and Epistle 2.58–60, Horace comments on his listeners' low opinion of satire.\textsuperscript{13} Moreover, each individual's hierarchy is temporally situated in the epoch in which he or she lived and wrote. As a result, one author's perspective may not apply to literature in an earlier or later era. For example, though it is clear from all the authors studied above (c.400 BC–AD 100) that for centuries history ranked highest amongst the prose genres, by the time of Philostratus in the third century AD, rhetoric had usurped the top position.

One suspects that personal genre hierarchies of prominent individuals influenced the larger societal genre hierarchy. A society's genre hierarchy may be shaped and even fabricated by dominant social and literary groups and individuals. Within the Roman Empire, no person had more power to influence than the Caesar, and the schools and writers he financially supported directly shaped literary culture. Consequently, it seems likely that a literary form that was advocated for and funded by the Caesar would become one of the dominant genre forms.\textsuperscript{14}

Just as genre hierarchies differed among individuals, they also differed between cultures. It is especially apparent in statements by Latin authors that Greek and Latin cultures had different literary preferences, which were shaped by wider ethnic and cultural factors. These cultural preferences found their ideal expression in particular genres, which in turn came to be prized and incorporated into the national identity. Such cultural differences are witnessed in the comments of Cicero, Horace, and Quintilian above. In Opt. Gen. 2 and 6, Cicero distinguishes between Latin and Greek genre examples. Moreover, Cicero recognizes Greek preference for iambic in Opt. Gen. 1, whereas Horace proudly claims that satire was untouched by the Greeks (Sat. 1.10.65–67). Quintilian provides the greatest insight into this cultural differentiation with his comparison of Greek literature to its Latin counterpart (e.g. Inst. 10.1.96, 99, 123).

\textsuperscript{12} Quint. Inst. 10.1.73, 101; Ps.-Longin. Subl. 14.1. That representative authors of each genre were well known is seen in Plin. Ep. 7.9.16.

\textsuperscript{13} Lucilius (F 608) expresses the low opinion of satire during his time, although this changes slightly in Late Antiquity.

\textsuperscript{14} 'The selective canons with most institutional force are formal curricula': Fowler (1982: 215).
Regarding biography, it is clear that Greek writers were more drawn to philosophical individuals than were Latin authors. For example, throughout the Hellenistic period, there was a distinct emphasis by biographers on intellectual figures, as opposed to politicians and military leaders. This focus was broadened in the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods, but philosophers were regularly the focus of biographies. Conversely, Latin authors rarely recounted the lives of philosophers, preferring political and military leaders. Even Suetonius, who expanded his *Illustrious Men* to include poets, orators, and grammarians, did not mention philosophers (so far as we know).

Although the full importance of genre hierarchy and ranking for biography will be revealed below, it is important at this stage to reinforce the view that the ancients knew and were engaged in developing genre hierarchies. Furthermore, the activity of ranking and comparing was not limited to the works produced by one’s own culture, but also engaged works of neighbouring cultures. This is especially apparent in Latin literary circles, which are constantly evaluating Latin literature in terms of its Greek equivalent.

**Genre Overlap and Differentiation:**

**Biography and History**

We can now turn our attention to the two most important prose genres for this volume: history and biography. As the number of genre features is limited, it is natural for there to be some genre overlap. By this, I mean the common use of one or more formal features in two or more genres. The closer the generic relationship, the greater the amount of overlap between the genres is expected. For example, both biography and history are written in prose, recount speeches, use sources, focus on important individuals, have comparable methods of characterization and setting, and are written for similar audiences. Due to the number of shared formal features, it is not surprising that a strong relationship existed between history and biography from biography’s inception throughout the Hellenistic and Roman eras.

The large numbers of shared features—particularly in light of the practice of ranking genres—result in power relations in which one literary form will influence the use and formation of another. Influence is not evenly multidirectional, but functions in a top-down manner; dominant or prestige genres resist change and so do not typically adopt the features of ‘subordinant’ genres; whereas, so-called secondary genres adopt features of dominant genres. These genre adaptations are sometimes subconsciously enacted, but can also be a conscious effort by an author to elevate the status of a particular literary work. As a

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17 For examples, see the works of Lucian, Iamblichus, Porphyry, Diogenes Laertius, Philostratus, Eunapius, and the anonymous work on Secundus, the Silent Philosopher.
18 For example, Cornelius Nepos and Tacitus.
19 For examples and further discussion, see Adams (2013: 116–171; 2020: 257–292).
result, there is a blurring of genre distinctiveness as characteristic features of the dominant genre are recognized as components of genres.

There are, however, some features that assist in differentiating these genres (sometimes referred to as ‘genre-specific’ or ‘genre-determinative’ features), though it is more often the case that it is the full constellation of formal features which suggests genre participation. Between history and biography these differentiating elements would include size, scope (a focus on more than an individual/a collection of individuals), structure, select literary topoi, and purpose. For example, ancient histories were structured topographically and chronologically (D.H. Th. 9), whereas individual biographies were structured around the life (and death) of the subject (e.g. Eus. Hier. 3), and collected biographies focused on succession or recounting the lives of illustrious individuals within a field. One way of immediately highlighting the differences in genre for the reader was the opening of the work, which includes both the opening sentence and the preface/prologue (Hor. A.P. 136–152; Lucian Hist. Conscr. 23). In the opening the reader is introduced to the subject, and through the overall structure, the subject is presented. For historical works, there appears to be a common refrain of speaking about a nation/ethnic group or a possible war that the author plans to memorialize for all time. Conversely, biographies regularly open with a reference to the individual or group of individuals that will be discussed. Differences in structure shape the reader’s appropriation of material and assist in defining the purpose of the writing. As we will see below, this differentiation was important for both biographers and historians.

For Plutarch, the writing of his Parallel Lives was not a task divorced from history, but one in which history was embodied through the examination of selected lives (Aem. 1.1–4; on this passage, see also Chapter 3 in this volume). In some of his prefaces, Plutarch speaks candidly about his work, discussing its purpose, function, and nature. Repeatedly he employs the terms ἱστορία and βίος as descriptors of his project. Both of these terms, however, have wider semantic ranges than specific genre labels. For example, ἱστορία does not necessarily signify the genre of history (though it could), but could also be used as a referent for the broader concept of inquiry or narrative, even distinguishing between prose and poetry. Accordingly, it is necessary to determine which aspect of the term ἱστορία is being invoked at any given instance. For example, in Timoleon 1.1–4 Plutarch uses these terms in tandem to discuss his work, ‘I receive and welcome each subject of my ἱστορίας…Among which is the βίος of Timoleon the Corinthian and Aemilius Paulus, which we have undertaken to lay before you.’ In this case, it is unlikely that either term signifies to the reader a formal genre category (cf. Dem. 2.1).

21 There is also the recognition that certain genres are not to have certain features, so-called ‘anti-features’, e.g. Arist. Po. 1448a19–23; Philostr. VA 1.16.2.
22 Arist. Po. 1452b15–16; Hor. A.P. 189; D.H. Ant. Rom. 1.1.1; Th. 9.
23 For example, Hdt. 1.1; Th. 1.1; Plb. 1.1.1, 5; D.S. 1.1.1–1.4.5; Hdn. 1.1.1–6; Livy, Hist. Praef. 1–10.
24 For example, Matt 11; Mark 13; Plu. Alex. 1.1; Porph. Plot. 1; Iamb. VP 1; Philostr. VS 479; Eun. VPS 453; Hier. Vir. ill. Praef.
26 For example, Porph. Plot. 24; Theon Prog. 60.4, 6; 70.3, 6, 12; 80.17; 81.2, 7; Eus. Hier. 3. Cf. Hägg (2012a: 377–378).
This ambiguity is not the case in his famous discussion at the opening of his parallel Lives of Alexander and Caesar where he claims that he is not writing history, but Lives (οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν, ἀλλὰ βίους, Alex. 1.2, on which, see also Chapter 24 in this volume). In order to differentiate between the two, Plutarch speaks of his purpose: the revelation of character (virtue or vice) through the recounting of actions and sayings, both great and small. The recounting of deeds and speech was a standard way of portraying a person’s character in many genres, but was particularly strong in biographies. For Plutarch, the actions of his subjects display their virtues and vices in order to elicit positive change within the reader. Similar intentions are expressed by Eunapius, although his desire is to showcase the full achievement of the philosophical life for those who wish to follow after it (VPS 455).

Cornelius Nepos also felt compelled to explain his depiction of Pelopidas in his On Foreign Generals, outlining his dilemma of what to include in light of the genre requirements of history and biography: Pelopidas of Thebes is better known to those acquainted with history (historicis) than to the multitude. As to his merits, I am in doubt how I shall speak of them; for I fear that, if I begin to give a full account of his actions, I may seem, not to be relating his life, but to be writing a history (ne non vitam eius enarrare, sed historiam videar scribere), or that, if I touch only on his principal exploits, it may not clearly appear to those ignorant of Grecian literature how great a man he was (ne rudibus graecarum litterarum minus dilucide appareat, quantus fuerit ille vir). I will therefore, as far as I can, meet both difficulties and provide against the satiety as well as for the imperfect knowledge of my readers. (Pelop. 1.1)

One of the primary concerns for Nepos is that he is consistent in his presentation of Pelopidas and does not change genre from biography to history. The main issue appears to be Nepos’ desire to outline Pelopidas’ virtue so thoroughly that he risked exceeding the accepted parameters of biography (cf. Nep. Vitae, Praef.). Once again we see a close relationship between biography and history, but a recognition by the author that there is a difference between the two.

Although the extent of history’s influence on biography differed, depending on the time period and the geographic locale, the fact that certain famous people (e.g. generals, kings, politicians, philosophers, etc.) were regularly the focus of both genres dictated that writers of history and biography were necessarily aware of what was being written in the other genre (e.g. Plb. Hist. 10.21.8, 16.14.6). It is worth emphasizing that, in light of this relationship, it is the writers of biography who felt most compelled to define their task in contrast to history and not vice versa (e.g. Nep. Pelop. 16.1.1; Plu. Alex. 1.2–3; Pomp. 8). This suggests

27 X. Ages. 1.6; Cyr. 1.1.6; Tac. Agr. 1.1; Plu. Pomp. 8.6; Cat. Mi. 37.5; Philostr. VA 1.2.3; 1.19.3; Eun. VPS 453.
28 Cf. Per. 2.2; Cat. Mi. 9.10; Mor. 84B. T.E. Duff (1999: 40–47, 52–71).
29 Cf. Plb. Hist. 8.8, who critiques Theopompus for beginning with history and changing to biography. After the fourth century AD, there was genre convergence as biography and history blended to form a new genre of ‘biographical historiography’. Swain (1997).
that ancient biographers viewed history as the dominant or more established literary form and that they were attempting to describe their task in comparison with the other.

The near absence of mention of biography among works of history is not surprising despite their close relationship. This is because history, as the dominant genre, does not need to differentiate itself from subordinant genres, nor would it be desirable for these authors to encourage such comparisons. However, Polybius, *Hist.* 10.21.2–8 provides an excellent example of the perceived differences between history and biography:

> It is strangely inconsistent in historians to record in elaborate detail the founding of cities, stating when and how and by whom they were established, and even the circumstances and difficulties which accompanied the transaction, and yet to pass over in complete silence the characteristics and aims of the men by whom the whole thing was done, though these in fact are the points of the greatest value. For as one feels more roused to emulation and imitation by men that have life, than by buildings that have none, it is natural that the history of the former should have a greater educational value. If I had not therefore already composed a separate account of him [Philopoemen], clearly setting forth who he was, his origin, and his policy as a young man, it would have been necessary to have given an account now of each of these particulars. But since I have done this in a work in three books, unconnected with my present history (τὸν ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν πεποιήμεθα λόγον), detailing the circumstances of his childhood and his most famous achievements, it is clear that in my present narrative my proper course will be to remove anything like details from my account of his youthful characteristics and aims; while I am careful to add details to the story of the achievements of his manhood, which in that treatise were only stated summarily. I shall thus preserve the proper features of both works. The former being in the nature of a panegyric demanded an account of his actions, put briefly and in a style deliberately intended to enhance their merits; my present work, which is history (οὕτως ὁ ἱστορίας), and therefore absolutely uncommitted to praise or blame, requires only a true statement, which puts the facts clearly, and traces the policy which dictated the several actions. (trans. Shuckburgh 1889)

In this passage, Polybius succinctly outlines the nature of his dilemma, highlighting the different purposes and components of biography and history. According to Polybius, the genres of biography and history are related in that they both discuss similar people, but are differentiated by which details are included and the intended function of the genre. This is a unique insight into the way that a writer from the Hellenistic era distinguished these two related genres.

These comments by ancient biographers and historians challenge the claim by Hägg (2012a: 3), that 'biography is more subject matter than form', by asserting that a combination of the two are needed. From these discussions we see that there is significant overlap in content between biography and history with regard to the depiction of individuals. Content, in and of itself, is insufficient to distinguish these genres, though the selection of which life details are included may help in determining genre participation. Structure plays a substantial role in the creation of collected biographies, as the life of the individual is

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31 For the debate surrounding Polybius’ *Life of Philopoemen*, see Walbank (1967: 221).
placed within a larger grouping. In such cases, subject matter is important, but it does not adequately assist in defining the genre.

From the above examples we can see that care was taken by ancient writers to differentiate the related genres of history and biography. This is especially the case for writers of biography as their ‘subordinant’ genre was more vulnerable and needed to be defined in contrast to the dominant other. As part of these discussions we witness how the term βίος and ἱστορία are employed together towards a definition of βίος. A βίος is not a work of ἱστορία, but individuals who were regularly involved in major events memorialized in histories were also worthy of more specific and individualized focus. The difference between the two forms is that individual βίοι focused narrowly on the life and death of an individual, whereas ἱστορίαι place the individual’s life within a larger narrative, such as a war or the establishment of a nation. Collected biographies, which focus on multiple lives, also place the discussion of the individual within a larger framework. However, in this case, it is often on a specific topic or theme (e.g. philosophical school, illustrious lives, etc.) and not necessarily structured on military or political events.32 The primary example of the latter would be succession narratives, such as Suetonius’ Lives of the Caesars, in which there is a strong overlap between the life of the Caesar and the development of the Roman Empire. This last example illustrates the close relationship that biographies and histories can have and that definitive categorizations and rigid differentiations between history and biography are not always tenable.

The first example of this tradition comes from Tacitus (Agr. 1.1), who briefly alludes to a tradition of recounting the deeds of famous men for posterity: ‘To hand down to posterity the deeds of famous men (Clarorum virorum facta) was a custom of the past: our age has not yet abandoned it even now . . . ’.33 Although Tacitus does not explicitly mention the genre of biography, this discussion within a work of biography (along with other examples of recounting the life of a person after death) suggests that Tacitus thought of himself as

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32 For a longer discussion on collected biographies, particularly in light of their differences from individual biographies, see Adams (2013: 109–115).

33 In contrast, Isocrates, Evag. 8 highlights the lack of tradition with his claim that he is the first to eulogize in prose, though he does recognize that people have praised good people before (Evag. 5; cf. X. Ages. 1.1).
continuing this tradition of post-mortem veneration in order to ensure that the name and deeds of famous (worthy) men would be preserved.

Philostratus also mentions previous works in the opening of his *Life of Apollonius* 1.3.1–2, in which he identifies other authors who have written on Apollonius before and so places himself within the literary tradition of recounting the life of a specific person. A useful ancient perspective on Philostratus’ work comes from Eusebius, who states:

Philostratus, however, the Athenian, tells us that he collected all the accounts that he found in circulation, using both the book of Maximus and that of Damis himself and of other authors; so he compiled the most complete history (ἱστορίαν) of any of this person’s life (βίου), beginning with his birth and ending with his death. (Hier. 3, trans. F.C. Conybeare 1912)

In this passage, Eusebius highlights the methodology adopted by Philostratus and his awareness of what was needed to successfully compose a biography. Moreover, Eusebius provides a definition of βίος that is strictly delineated by the birth and death of the individual. Eusebius’ use of the term ἱστορία in association with βίος further illuminates our discussion above of the relationship of the term βίος and ἱστορία. Here Eusebius frames the background inquiry/research of a biography to that of history (so too Plutarch), while maintaining that the final product is not ἱστορία but βίος.

Philostratus associates his *Lives of the Sophists* to previous works when he refers in his preface (480) to Critias and his practice of not introducing a sophist by his father’s name. The lone exception to this was Homer, as Critias felt compelled to recall the tradition that the river Meles was Homer’s father. References to similar authors are found in Diogenes Laertius who, among many other citations, mentions Sotion in the opening paragraph of his work (1.1; cf. S.E. M. 7.15). Although not as explicit as the other examples provided below, the mention of sources and of similar previous works indicates an awareness of the genre of biography, his task as an author, and his place within the wider tradition.

One example of an author identifying his place within a tradition that has drawn significant attention is the preface to Jerome’s *Illustrious Men*, in which Jerome explains his work in light of a literary convention:³⁴ ‘A similar work has been done by Hermippus the Peripatetic, Antigonus Carystius, the learned Satyrus, and most learned of all, Aristoxenus the Musician, among the Greeks, and among the Latins by Varro, Santra, Nepos, Hyginus, and by him through whose example you seek to stimulate us—Tranquillus’ (*Vir. ill. Praef.*).

In this introduction, Jerome identifies nine literary predecessors who have produced similar works. Scholars interpret Jerome’s reference as indicating a literary tradition and the prestige that had been attached to these selected prototypical authors, and not as Jerome’s identifying the first representatives of the genre.³⁵ Similar to other discussions of genre above, Jerome divides his examples into two categories according to language/culture—Greek and Latin—thus reinforcing the idea that, though both cultures had similar literary contributions, there was a distinction in the minds of the ancients between Greek and Latin genres and their prototypical representatives (see also Nep. *Epam. 1.1*).

³⁴ Hägg (2012a: 69).
³⁵ Leo (1901: 17), Momigliano (1993: 78–9), and Geiger (1985: 32).
Arguably the most explicit and helpful description of the history of biography comes from the opening of Eunapius’ *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*. Immediately following his preface, Eunapius identifies writers who have previously endeavoured to compose a history of the Lives of philosophers. His discussion is worth consulting in full, but for space restrictions only the pertinent aspects have been quoted:

Porphyry and Sotion compiled a history of philosophy and the Lives of philosophers… Philostratus of Lemnos in a superficial and agreeable style spat forth the Lives of the most distinguished sophists, but the lives of philosophers no one has recorded accurately… The inspired Plutarch records in statements scattered here and there in his books, both his own life and that of his teacher… but he does not entitle these records a Life (βίον), though he might well have done so, since his most successful work is that called *Parallel Lives* of men most celebrated for their deeds and achievements… Lucian of Samosata, who usually took serious pains to raise a laugh, wrote a Life of Demonax, a philosopher of his own time, and in that book and a very few others was wholly serious throughout. (VPS 454, trans. Wright 1921)

In this section Eunapius delineates the scope of his project by comparing it to those who have gone before him. In his discussion Eunapius names five authors who have written biographical works on philosophers. The earliest of which is Sotion, who flourished in the second century BC, while the latest is Porphyry, who lived in the late third century AD. Within this substantial range Eunapius identifies other contributors, though his list is not exhaustive (omitting Philodemus, Diogenes Laertius, etc.). Eunapius also only mentions Greek authors, likely because Latin authors were less interested in philosophy. Not only does this discussion identify the tradition of philosophical biographies, but it signals to the reader how Eunapius wishes his readers to contextualize his work.

In addition to identifying previous contributions, Eunapius also highlights areas in which no previous work has been written. For example, when talking about writing the Lives of specific philosophers (i.e., Musonius, Demetrius, Menippus) Eunapius laments, ‘Clear and accurate accounts of the lives of these men it was impossible to discover, since, so far as I know, no one has written them’ and ‘the lives of philosophers no one has recorded accurately’ (VPS 454). Eunapius is clearly not claiming that there has been no book of Lives written on philosophers (as his lament is in the context of literary history), but rather he is challenging the accuracy of his predecessors. Although modern scholars might question the veracity of this statement, it is important to engage with Eunapius’ statement as valid from his perspective. What is clear is Eunapius’ desire to situate himself within the larger tradition of philosophical biographies and to indicate in what areas he is making a contribution.

A few points are worth highlighting as we conclude this section. First, the statements by Tacitus, Philostratus, Jerome, Eunapius, and others provide clear evidence that biographers in Antiquity saw themselves as continuing a tradition of writing biographies. Second, most of the authors who discuss this tradition are from Late Antiquity. This is interesting, though not surprising as by the fourth century AD the genre of biography was widely recognized, more firmly established, and had greater recognition. This is (clearly) not to claim that biography as a genre did not exist in earlier epochs (cf. Tacitus), but that the majority of this retrospective discussion of tradition only occurs late in the Roman era.

With this being said, the clear references to the genre of biography by authors above, especially in contradistinction to history, indicate that ancient writers (e.g. Polybius)
recognized the genre of biography even if they did not explicitly mention literary forebears. Nevertheless, the referencing of biographical tradition by later authors and the lack of defining biography vis-à-vis history affirm the view that by the later Empire, biography was a more established genre form. As a result, it could be self-referencing and internally defined without explicitly distinguishing it from other prose genres. This is a marked change from earlier generations of biography writers (e.g. Plutarch) and highlights the development of this genre and the awareness of its users.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter highlights the ways the ancients approached and discussed genres with a focus on the role of biography within the larger genre system. The ancients not only had a robust concept of genre, but they distinguished each genre by the inclusion, exclusion, and arrangement of specific formal features. Although these features are typically used to distinguish one genre from another, certain genres (e.g. biography and history) have elements in common. This ‘genre overlap’ of formal features strengthens genre relationships and influences the development of genre hierarchies. In particular, we focused on the relationship between biography and history, arguing that history was portrayed by ancients as the dominant prose genre, not only because it was given pride of place in prose lists, but also because biographers, and not historians, felt the need to define their task in contrast to the other. The strong similarities between these two genres and their uneven power relationship resulted in a number of discussions by ancient biographers on the difference between biography and history, specifically focusing on the different purpose(s) for each genre. One of the main contributions of this chapter is that biography was a recognized genre form and that ancient biographers, particularly those in the later Empire, actively sought to situate themselves within this tradition. Originally, biography was defined by its authors in light of discussions of history; however, as time progressed, biographers showed a growing awareness and promotion of the ongoing tradition of this literary genre. This genre awareness allowed ancient biographers to define their task in light of representative authors who had preceded them and to cease defining themselves in contrast to another genre.

**FURTHER READING**

For a more thorough introduction to ancient genre theory with particular attention paid to biography, I would recommend Burridge (2018) and Adams (2013). A number of scholars have looked at the development of biography and the role of specific authors in its formulation as a discrete genre form. Four good examples of this work are P. Cox (1983), Geiger (1985), Momigliano (1993), and Swain (1997). For recent overviews of biography in Antiquity that are very good, though not particularly systematic in how they connect biographers, see Sonnabend (2002) and Hägg (2012a). The earlier work by Leo (1901) is a classic, formative work and is worth investigating for serious study, although his perspectives have been challenged and are no longer widely held (see Chapter 1 in this volume). For those looking to do work on a specific biographer, I would recommend T.E. Duff (1999) as an exemplar of how to read and interpret ancient collected biographies by paying special attention to the macro structure of the work.
CHAPTER 3

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTED LIVES IN ANTIQUITY

JEFFREY BENEKER

A biography is, by definition, the written account of a person’s life, and therefore every biography is focused fundamentally on an individual. Nonetheless, the major biographers of Greece and Rome whose writings are extant—Cornelius Nepos, Plutarch, and Suetonius—all wrote Lives as parts of collections, and these collections influenced the form and function of their writings. All three authors, moreover, make use of the juxtapositions of Lives inherent in their collections to encourage comparative readings, and, in the case of Nepos and Plutarch, they expect readers to reflect on their own lives and societies as they read about statesmen, generals, and kings from the past. This chapter explores the implications of writing about individuals in the context of collections, taking up each of the authors mentioned above in a separate section and discussing other instances of individual and collected Lives. First, however, I examine early traces of the collection and comparison of Lives, taking Herodotus as my primary example to show that the ‘life-writing’ found in ancient political biography has been a part of the historiographical tradition from the beginning.

Herodotus’ ‘Lives’ of Croesus and Cyrus

The question of individual and collected Lives is, in fact, best considered as part of the development of ancient biography. Beginning in the middle of the Classical period, examples of biographical narrative appear in many types of Greek prose literature, well before biography proper emerges as an independent mode of writing (see Hägg 2012a: 10–66). This is especially true in historiography, where authors might focus narrowly on the character and careers of individuals to explain the course of larger political and military events, or to give their histories a moralizing dimension. In Greek historiography of the
fourth century BC, the moralizing and protreptic elements were pronounced, as we may observe by reading Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ assessment of the historian Theopompus. In the course of documenting Theopompus’ diligence and the variety of his subject matter, Dionysius says that he ‘revealed lives (βίους) of kings and the peculiarities of their ways (τρόπων ἰδιώματα)’, clearly finding an element of political biography in his history (Pomp. 6.4).\(^1\) Even more revealing, however, is the oft-quoted passage where Dionysius praises Theopompus’ special insight. Not only could he notice and articulate the things that were obvious to most people, but he could also ‘examine the invisible causes for actions and the motivations and emotions of those who acted, which many people do not easily see’, and this ability in turn allowed him to ‘reveal all the secrets of apparent virtue and of unrecognised vice’ (6.7). The exercise of this sort of insight, which involves the exposition of character both to explain the course of historical events and to offer lessons to the reader, becomes fundamental to writers of political biography in later generations (see Gentili and Cerri 1988: 14–18).

As the basis for the present discussion, I look to Herodotus, the first historian in the Greek tradition, and in particular to the first book of his Histories. There we find the so-called ‘Croesus logos’, which we may read essentially as a political biography of the Lydian king embedded within the larger narrative of Graeco-Persian relations. As later, formal biographers would regularly do, Herodotus crafts his ‘Life’ of Croesus to elucidate the character of the individual person, developing the portrait of a man blinded by power and wealth, and to demonstrate his accomplishments as king, using both the personal and the political to explain how the Ionian Greek cities came to be involved with non-Greek nations and how Lydian influence in Ionia gave way to Persian. And so this ‘Life’, interesting in its own right, ultimately lays the foundation for Herodotus’ narrative of the expansion of the Persian Empire into Asia Minor. This expansion, in turn, is similarly cast as the birth-to-death story of Cyrus the Great, intertwined in its inception with the story of Croesus but eventually emerging as the primary plotline in the second half of Book One.

The notion that an individual’s character can shape history is fundamental to Herodotus’ use of biographical elements. Also present, however, are two important expectations: that readers will compare the lives of Croesus and Cyrus, and that they will consciously shape their own behaviour using another’s life as a model. We find both of these expectations embedded in the narrative of Histories.1 As Herodotus makes the transition from the Lydian to the Persian king, thereby bringing his Croesus logos to a close, he places the lessons of Croesus’ life in the foreground (1.86–91), making them obvious to the reader and even to Cyrus himself, who benefits from the example of the Lydian king’s experiences and thus becomes the first and most important ‘reader’ of his life. The lesson is taught as follows. After hearing his prisoner Croesus exclaim Solon’s name as he is about to be burned alive, Cyrus sends his interpreters to ask whom he was calling (1.86). Croesus explains that Solon visited his palace in Sardis (as related in 1.29–33), and rather than be impressed by the king’s great wealth, treated it as though it were nothing. The wise Solon tried to show Croesus that his good fortune was transient, but Croesus could not understand the lesson until he had in fact lost all his possessions and was on the point even of losing his life. Solon, Croesus explains, was speaking not simply to him but to every human,

\(^1\) Translations are my own.
and ‘especially to those who consider themselves blessed’. Thus, Herodotus generalizes the lesson of Croesus’ life, and even goes on to demonstrate how it could be internalized: when Cyrus hears the story, he reflects that he is putting to death a fellow human who had quite recently been no less prosperous than himself. Fearing that he might face a similar reversal for his arrogance, he spares Croesus, speaks with him at length, and, amazed at the wisdom he gained through his downfall, makes him an advisor.

Considered in the light of the later tradition, this passage is fundamentally biographical. The focus on character, the narration of personal successes and failures to demonstrate that individual actions have civic consequences, and the protreptic nudge to the reader all become staples for Plutarch, whose later Parallel Lives represent one strand of the fully formed biographical genre. In the introduction to his Aemilius Paullus, to take one example, Plutarch describes how he and his readers ought to interact with the Lives he recreates:

I happened to undertake the writing of these Lives for the sake of others, but now I am continuing and enjoying them for my own sake. As if looking into a mirror (in some way or other), I try to use my investigation to give order to my life and to shape it according to the virtues of these men. For this experience is just like keeping a daily routine and living with them, whenever I welcome and receive each one of them in turn through my investigation, as if receiving a guest, and I observe ‘how great and of what character’ (Hom. Il. 24.630) each man is, deriving from his deeds what is most important and finest to know. (1.1–2)

Plutarch is here speaking of Lives in the plural, imagining his series of parallel biographies as a collection that would allow his readers to explore various aspects of character because it offered a variety of good and bad examples to imitate or avoid. The biographical element in Herodotus 1 offers something similar. Croesus did not understand that his good fortune could change, despite having been warned by Solon, and so was blind to the possibility of failure when Apollo revealed to him that if he crossed the River Halys to attack Cyrus, he would destroy a great empire (1.53). Croesus, without doubting that the great empire would be that of Cyrus, crossed the river, attacked the Persian army, and was defeated. A king attuned to the capriciousness of fortune would have considered that his own empire was liable to destruction before attempting to extend his power.2

This lesson, though easy to understand in light of Croesus’ downfall, is apparently hard to follow, a point that Herodotus makes as he continues his narrative and begins a second biography. Cyrus, despite knowing the outcome of Croesus’ arrogance, also overreaches and ultimately loses his life when he, too, crosses a river (the Araxes) in an attempt to extend his power too far. In commencing the final phase of Cyrus’ life, Herodotus describes his motivation for attacking the Massagetae, who inhabit the land across the Araxes, in terms that create a deliberate parallel with Croesus. Cyrus, he says, was eager to make war because he felt that his nature was something more than mortal and, more pointedly, because of the good fortune (εὐτυχία) that he had enjoyed against his enemies (1.204). Now

2 Pelling (2006b: 160–164) shows that the usurpation of the Lydian throne by Croesus’ ancestor, Gyges, is the primary reason for Croesus’ downfall, as Apollo later explains (1.91). The lesson about the mutability of fortune is what applies to all humans.
Solon had earlier warned Croesus that each day brings something different and that the fortunate (εὐτυχής) man is liable to reversal (1.32). Croesus’ defeat then proved him right. Cyrus is even warned by a dream that he will meet his end fighting the Massagetae (1.209–210), but, like Croesus, he does not understand the message. The reader, however, knows what lies ahead, and Cyrus’ defeat proves Solon’s wisdom a second time. In the aftermath of Cyrus’ downfall, there is no moment of clarity on a pyre or interview with a succeeding king that demonstrates the lessons of his life. There is in fact no need, since the lesson is already clear. And so rather than talk about lessons to be learned, Tomyris, the queen of the Massagetae, demonstrates the moral of the story bluntly and vividly: she soaks Cyrus’ head in a bag of blood. This, she declares to his corpse, is fitting revenge for his bloodthirsty behaviour, for Cyrus had captured her son by a trick and killed him, ignoring the queen’s demand that he return him and withdraw from her kingdom (1.214). Croesus had been lucky in his misfortune, for he lived on to become a trusted advisor to his conqueror following his defeat. The principal moral of Cyrus’ story, it seems, is that the consequences of misunderstanding the mutability of fortune can sometimes be much greater.

The road from Herodotus to the later biographers is not direct, but we can observe a biographical trend foreshadowed in the ‘parallel Lives’ of Croesus and Cyrus. In Plutarch’s biographies we find a focus on ethics and personal behaviour, with Plutarch himself serving as an example of how to use biography for self-improvement. Plutarch’s ethical purpose, that is to say, is fundamental to his Lives, as he declares in the Aemilius. Similarly, he structures his Lives in pairs, often establishing important themes in the first Life and then elaborating them in the second (see Pelling 1986: 94). This, too, is what Herodotus has done with the ‘Lives’ of the Lydian and Persian kings. In Herodotus, the ethical dimension is admittedly less prominent, though he makes use of comparative readings, as does Plutarch, and he foregrounds the intersection of personal behaviour and larger historical events. And both authors take up similar themes, as when Plutarch in the Lives of Alexander and Caesar explores the problem of leaders not recognizing the limits of their power (see Beneker 2012: 140–152), pointing to a lesson similar to the one we encounter in Herodotus. Plutarch’s Alexander even finds his limit at the River Ganges, which thus takes on a role equivalent to the one played by the Halys and Araxes in Herodotus.

Before moving on to biography proper, it will be useful to survey the trends towards writing and collecting Lives that anticipate the fully formed extant tradition. One of the first examples of over biographical writing comes from the Socratics, who sought to record their teacher’s way of life and instruction. They ‘experimented in biography, and the experiments were directed towards capturing the potentialities rather than the realities of individual lives’ (Momigliano 1993: 46). These experiments took the form of apologetic speeches, philosophical dialogues, and a lengthy collection of philosophical conversations (Xenophon’s Memorabilia) that both defended Socrates from his critics and explored (and extended) his teachings. Xenophon pushed even further, writing such proto-biographical works as the Cyropaedia, the Anabasis, and his encomium of the Spartan king Agesilaus (see Chapter 9 in this volume). Moving from the Classical into the Hellenistic period, we find evidence for ‘an unmistakably biographical form’ of writing and collections of Lives, but this evidence is fragmentary and allows ‘the construction of several conflicting hypotheses regarding the form and purpose of the various Lives’ (Hägg 2012a: 67–69). We can
identify, however, a tendency towards collecting information, whether in the form of anecdotes, teachings of philosophers, or lives, as well as evidence for ‘monographical Lives’ (borrowing the phrase from ibid.: 70). Into the latter category belongs, for example, the fragmentary Life of Euripides by Satyrus. Aristoxenus (a student of Aristotle) wrote individual Lives of philosophers (such as Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Archytas) and at least one poet (Telesichus), but appears also to have assembled biographical information, if not full Lives, in collections with titles such as On Tragic Poets and On Flute Players (see ibid.: 69–70). Others, such as Nearchus of Cyzicus and Hermippus of Smyrna, wrote Lives of famous men as collections, and there also appear during this period collections of Lives oriented around philosophers who founded ‘schools’ and their successors (see Adams 2013: 92–109, and Chapter 10 in this volume).

Cornelius Nepos’

On Foreign Generals

The first author of biography for whom a substantial corpus remains is Cornelius Nepos, who wrote in Latin during the first century BC but took as his subjects both Romans and non-Romans, especially Greeks. Although he did not write book-length biography, Nepos did create a collection of short Lives, Illustrious Men, in a series of books that were arranged by category. Only the book On Foreign Generals survives. It consists of a preface, the Lives of twenty-two military commanders, and another ‘Life’ that presents an overview of several kings. This book was originally paired with a parallel book on Roman generals. Also extant are two biographies, of Cato the Younger and Atticus, a friend of Nepos and Cicero’s famous correspondent. These Lives are said to belong to a book On Latin Historians (see Stem 2012: 1–30). Of these latter two works, the Cato is, according to a notice at the end of the Life, a condensed version of a separate, fuller biography. Because there is little trace of political biography before the first century, some scholars have argued that Nepos invented this type of Life (see Geiger 1985 and Tuplin 2000), though Stem (2012: 96–114) has modified this thesis to argue that Nepos invented serial political biography. Regardless of Nepos’ role in the development of the genre, we may engage with his writings as the first collection of Lives that allows close reading.

We are fortunate to have the full collection On Foreign Generals because Nepos has framed it with statements that give us insight into his purpose and methods. We find, as was the case with Herodotus and the other early Greek historiographers, that Nepos encourages readers to observe the character of the generals. Moreover, because the collections were originally organized around parallel books, Nepos also asks the reader to make a ‘global’ comparison between Romans and foreigners. In what follows, I begin with the preface and the transitional note that closes On Foreign Generals, to examine how Nepos conceived of his Lives as individual biographies but also as units of a larger work.

The preface introduces several themes essential to the consideration of individual and collected Lives. The first few sentences, addressed to the subject of Nepos’ Atticus, are as follows:
I do not doubt, Atticus, that there are many who will judge this type of writing (hoc genus scripturae) as trivial and not sufficiently appropriate to the characters of the greatest men, when they read my account of who taught music to Epaminondas, or when I include among his virtues (virtutes) that he danced pleasantly and played the flute with skill. But these people will in general be those who, inexperienced in Greek literature, will think that nothing is correct that does not conform to their own customs. If these people will understand that the same things are not dignified and shameful for everyone, but that everything is judged according to the customs of one’s ancestors, then they will not be surprised that I have followed the customs of the Greeks as I set forth their virtues (virtutes). (Praef. 1–3)

Scholars on several occasions have taken up the question of Nepos’ audience and the relativism in cultural values raised at the very outset of his book (e.g. Horsfall 1982; Titchener 2003; Beneker 2009; Stem 2012: 140–144). Important to the present discussion, however, is the assumption that an exploration of a general’s virtues will include a discussion of his skills in activities that take place off the battlefield. Moreover, Nepos speaks of the Greeks collectively, envisioning an exploration of generalship, virtue, and vice that spans a series of Lives. Although each Life in the book is more or less self-contained, Nepos also views the series as a single entity, and promises a common approach to all the Lives.

The interconnectedness of the series is reinforced in the note that closes the book. There Nepos writes, as he transitions to the parallel book of Roman generals, that ‘the time has come to make an end to this book and to set forth (explicare) the generals of the Romans, so that, with the deeds of both groups placed side by side, it will be easier to judge (iudicare) which men ought to be preferred’ (Hann. 13.4). As in the preface, the individual nature of each Life is collapsed into a collective whole, with the deliberate intention that the reader will make a composite assessment of the foreign generals and compare them as a whole to their Roman counterparts.

Turning to the individual biographies, we can see how they also reflect the duality of being the Life of an individual and belonging to a larger unit. Consider the introduction to the Eumenes: ‘If this man had been granted a fortune equal to his virtue (virtus), he would not in deed have been any greater—for we measure great men by their virtue, not their fortune—but he would have been much more famous and even more distinguished’ (1.1). Eumenes, Nepos goes on to explain, had the misfortune of living while the Macedonians were flourishing, and being an outsider kept him from attaining his potential, and from receiving the fame that would have been his due. Here we can glimpse Nepos’ criteria for including him in the collection: the strength of his moral character rather than the magnitude of his accomplishments or his stature in the histories of his times. We can observe the same sort of selection at work in the Thrasybulus, where Nepos claims that the Athenian general was unsurpassed in virtue (virtus), but was excelled by many in fame, and especially by the flamboyant Alcibiades (1.1–3). Nepos, then, prefers character to reputation and popularity, and appears to have selected subjects whose careers demonstrated that they had lived their lives and performed their duties as generals virtuously.

What were some of the virtues demonstrated by these foreign generals? In the case of Eumenes, we read of loyalty (he refuses to abandon his friend Perdiccas despite his cause being lost, 3), honour (he gives his defeated enemy Craterus a ceremonial burial on account
of his dignity and their former friendship, 4), and cunning (he outwits Antigonus and stops his army’s advance through a trick, 9). In the Thrasybulus we encounter the general who opposed tyranny at Athens. Nepos calls his small group of followers the ‘source of salvation for the Athenians, the bulwark of liberty for a most glorious state’ (2), and he records that when freedom was restored to the Athenians, Thrasybulus passed a law of amnesty that halted further civil war (3). Despite Nepos’ warning in the preface, not all the virtues narrated in the Lives are culturally relative. They in fact demonstrated many well-recognized qualities that were also important to the Romans (such as loyalty, bravery, patriotism, and amnesty), which could in turn become the basis for comparison between the generals.

Nepos’ emphasis on virtue seems also to have influenced the selection of material within the individual Lives. In particular, he sought to avoid an excess of historical detail. At the opening of the Pelopidas, for example, Nepos claims to face a dilemma over how much historical information about the Theban general to include: he was not well known to Romans, but narrating too many of his accomplishments might transform his biography into a history and so obscure his virtues (1.1; see Chapter 2 in this volume for the full passage). Like Eumenes and Thrasybulus, Pelopidas appears in Nepos’ collection not because of his fame but because of the virtue he displayed in the course of his career. Nepos will, by necessity, include some historical information, but promises only enough to support the contention that Pelopidas was an important figure. In the Miltiades we find the opposite problem: Nepos has arranged his material to keep proper history at bay in the Life of a truly famous man. The Miltiades consists of eight chapters, three of which are devoted to the Battle of Marathon, appropriately enough, since Miltiades’ victory there was his crowning achievement. But of those three chapters, the first two describe preparations for the battle, and the third is devoted to the honours granted to Miltiades afterwards. The battle itself is reduced to a single sentence that underscores the character of the army: ‘The Athenians had such a great advantage in virtue (virtus) that they routed an enemy force ten times larger than their own, and they struck so much terror into the Persians that they fled not to their camp but to their ships’ (5.5). Here Nepos emphasizes the collective virtue of the soldiers at the expense of details about the battle, and has even declined to say anything specific about Miltiades’ own actions. Thus the reader learns nothing of how the battle actually unfolded, only that virtue—here probably to be read as courage—won the day.

At the conclusion of the book, as we have seen, Nepos asks his readers to compare the collection of foreign generals to his (now lost) book of Roman generals and to judge which group is superior. In writing On Foreign Generals, however, Nepos appears also to have envisioned a second comparandum for his reader, the Romans of his own day. Dionisotti (1988), Millar (1988), and Stem (2012: 114–127) have argued that many of the moral lessons in the book are really a commentary on contemporary leadership and society in the late Republic. One example comes from the Agesilaus. The general is abroad and planning a campaign against Persia when a message arrives from Sparta recalling him to assist in a war at home. Agesilaus’ response, Nepos writes, proves his devotion to his country (pietas), for he gave up the campaign, which surely would have been successful, and returned home immediately. Then Nepos adds: ‘If only our generals had been willing to follow his example!’ (4.2). The use of ‘our’, Stem (2012: 212) asserts, indicates that Nepos is referring to generals in his own time. Dionisotti takes this for granted and argues that Nepos is doing
more than using the past to teach a lesson: ‘Nepos, the critics say, is prone to moralising. But I would put it to you that passages like this are no mere moralising. They are comment on political behaviour, with a pretty sharp edge to recent events, implying also a specific view, as much political as moral, of what has gone wrong’ (Dionisotti 1988: 39). Such a reading adds another dimension to the comparative aspect of Nepos’ biographies, making them even more relevant to his contemporary audience.

**Plutarch’s Parallel Lives**

We turn from Nepos to Plutarch, whose *Parallel Lives* series also looks to historical figures as the subjects of political biography, while promoting an even broader ethical programme and teaching more general political principles. There are other important differences as well. Although the *Parallel Lives* series contains biographies of some of the same men as Nepos’ *On Foreign Generals*, each of Plutarch’s Lives is much larger in scope and arranged into one of twenty-three books. Each of these books, twenty-two of which are extant, consists of a pair of Lives, one of a Greek and the other of a Roman statesman, general, or king (see Chapter 13 in this volume for details).

As we saw above in the introduction to the *Aemilius*, Plutarch could imagine his biographical subjects as his guests as he wrote their subjects’ Lives. The *Aemilius* also suggests that the series grew gradually, and although the first pair of Lives, *Epaminondas–Scipio*, has been lost, it does not appear to have contained a statement that set out an overarching plan or programme for the whole collection. Most scholars believe that some groups of Lives were researched and published together (see T.E. Duff 1999: 6, for a summary), but it seems clear from Plutarch’s own comments that the *Parallel Lives* texts were published as a series over time rather than all at once (see Jones 1966). From the readers’ perspective, however, the guests accumulated as the series grew, and since the corpus is established, regardless of the order of publication, we can explore themes that Plutarch developed within individual Lives, within books, and across the series.

Plutarch indeed seems to have taken pains to build cohesiveness at various levels. As Pelling explains, each individual biography plays ‘a double role, perhaps even a treble role, of *Life* as complete in itself, *Life* as part of a pair, and *Life* as part of a series’. And for Plutarch, there was ‘an alertness to all those “wholes” as guiding the selection and emphasis of material’ (Pelling 2010: 224). Pelling himself explores the idea that the *Parallel Lives* series was intended to provide a global history of Greece and Rome. There is in fact broad historical coverage in the aggregate of the Lives, but Pelling ultimately rejects the idea of a complete history, finding too many gaps in the coverage and concluding that Plutarch was always willing to subordinate historical themes to his primary purpose, ‘the understanding and judging of the individual heroes’ (ibid.: 227). Nonetheless, there are examples of books that complement each other in ways that appear intentional. Consider, for instance, the books that include Lives of Romans from the late Republic. In addition to a complex web of cross-references and strong evidence of joint composition (see Pelling 1979), there are themes and an overall account of events that are only fully fleshed out when the Lives are considered together. To take one example, the Lives of Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus
function as a sort of triad in their depiction of the political interactions of the men who formed the first political triumvirate. In Plutarch’s conception, Caesar was the dominating contender, Pompey held the second position, and Crassus was subordinate to both of them. Even though he highlights the best qualities of the heroes in their individual biographies, Plutarch maintains their relative positions across all three Lives, pointedly describing the weaknesses that hindered Pompey and Crassus and the strengths that allowed Caesar to dominate both of his rivals. A complete understanding of each man’s political career and character requires a reading of all three Lives (see Beneker 2005; J.T. Chlup 2013).

Even more important, however, is the cohesion of the pairs, or books, of parallel Lives. Here thematic development is strongest, and the demonstration of character through narrative, syncrisis, and authorial comment is more explicit. Plutarch probably did not attempt to make his biographies reflect on particular politicians or the emperors of his own day (see Pelling 2002c). He was, however, interested in using historical figures as examples for the instruction of contemporary politicians, and this had a strong influence on the themes of his biography. We gain insight into how Plutarch thought the past could be instructive from his essay Political Precepts, where he addresses a young man who is in need of political instruction but lacks the time for a practical education. As Plutarch explains, this is just the situation where examples from the past can be useful:

Since you do not have the time to observe the philosopher’s life openly in the midst of political affairs and public trials, nor to witness examples accomplished in deed rather than in word, you ask to receive some political instruction, and I believe that a refusal on my part would be entirely inappropriate . . . I have made use of a wide variety of examples, just as you have requested. (798B–C)

In the course of the essay Plutarch touches on various topics, such as the importance of character in being selected for office and the necessity of being able to speak persuasively in assembly. Such topics are important to the success of modern politicians, and all are illustrated (positively or negatively) by real politicians from the past.

Plutarch follows the same tack in his Parallel Lives, with an even wider variety of examples, most of which illustrate ethical rather than political themes. He has, moreover, structured his books to encourage comparison, or syncrisis, at many levels as a means of highlighting his subjects’ careers and character. Syncrisis is the natural result of the pairing of Lives, and Plutarch takes advantage of the pairings through a technique of ‘pattern and variation: the first Life [in a pair] sets a pattern which is then exploited and varied in the second’ (T.E. Duff 1999: 250; see also Pelling 1986b). Many of the books also conclude with a formal syncrisis, where Plutarch compares the heroes directly. This is a ‘harder-edged, more critical analysis’ (T.E. Duff 1999: 259) than what is found in the narrative of the Lives, and Plutarch will often introduce new material or apply a different interpretation to material previously narrated. Finally, Plutarch also compares his subjects to their contemporaries or other historical figures. For instance, he compares Pompey to Alexander the Great, and finds him lacking (Pomp. 2, 46), and he compares Pericles not only to other politicians but also to the Athenian people as a whole, and finds him superior (Per. 33–35). This ‘internal’ syncrisis gives to the individual Lives an interpretive depth that allows them to stand alone as biographies, as they often do in modern collections,
despite the highly developed interconnectedness with other Lives in the same book and in
the series.

**Suetonius’ Lives of the Caesars**

In addition to his *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch also wrote a series of Lives of the Roman
emperors, the *Lives of the Caesars*, arranged in chronological order from Augustus to
Vitellius. Only the Galba and Otho remain, so we know very little about the form of these
biographies or why Plutarch chose to write them. Regardless, he appears to have been the
first to write a *Caesars* (see Chapter 14 in this volume). The most famous series of imperial
Lives, however, belongs to Suetonius. His collection begins with Julius Caesar and ends
with Domitian, thus covering a longer span of time than Plutarch’s collection and, signifi-
cantly, now including Julius at the head of the dynasty. Apart from his choice of where to
begin and, perhaps, where to end his series, the individual Lives included in Suetonius’
collection were determined by the historical circumstances of who ruled and when. Thus,
we see a fundamental difference between the *Caesars* (of both Plutarch and Suetonius) and
Nepos’ *On Foreign Generals* and Plutarch’s other series, the *Parallel Lives*. For the latter
two, once the broad terms of the collection were set, the authors could select the subjects
that best served as vehicles for their ethical and political programmes. Even so, the impetus
to collect according to a category, in this case, the category of ‘Caesars’, links Suetonius’
series to other collections, such as Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* and
Philostratus’ *Lives of the Sophists*, and even to his own collection *Illustrious Men*, which
contained the Lives of poets, orators, historians, philosophers, and grammarians and
rhetoricians. We might further consider this sort of collection in the larger context of the
miscellanies (collections of anecdotes, literary discussions of problems, and the like) that
were popular during the Second Sophistic (see T. Morgan 2011).

If we compare Suetonius’ *Caesars* to Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, we discover a radically
different approach to biography. The differences are so great that they have been used as
evidence to support theories about the development of different strands of the biographical
genre. A detailed comparison is beyond the scope of this discussion, but we can note here
that while Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* contain birth-to-death narratives of important historical
figures and take an overtly moralizing approach, Suetonius’ *Caesars* eschew chronological
arrangement, and although they reveal much information about the character of the
emperors, they do not attempt to shape the morals of the reader. Both authors, however,
were using historical material and so faced the problem of distinguishing their biographies
from history. We find this concern in Nepos as well: recall the dilemma he poses in the
opening chapter of the *Pelopidas* about including too much or too little historical material.
Plutarch observes essentially the same problem at *Alexander* 1, asking his readers not to
quibble if he does not narrate the full histories of Alexander and Caesar. Suetonius was
conscious of the problem, too, and his ‘reaction to the dilemma was vigorous’ (Wallace-
Hadrill 1983: 8–10). This reaction is to be found in the very structure of his *Caesars*, which
reflect a deliberate choice to avoid a form that looks like history. Suetonius himself explains
his approach in the *Augustus*: ‘Having presented essentially a summary of his life, I will
now set forth the parts individually, not according to their chronology but by category, so that they may be explained and appreciated more clearly’ (9.1). Particular information provided in aggregate form in the Life of Julius includes, for example, the queens he had affairs with (52), how little wine he drank (53), and his skill as an orator (55).

We have observed in Nepos and Plutarch, and indeed as far back as Herodotus, that one of the advantages of collected Lives was the ability to compare the experiences and character of historical figures. Suetonius’ arrangement by category facilitates comparison as well. ‘No two of the Caesares are exactly the same, but a corresponding group of personal details is found in almost every one, composed of the same basic items (appearance, style of living, characteristics, intellectual pursuits) or a selection of them, in this order or in a variation of it’ (Wallace-Hadrill 1983: 68). This is a structure that overtly encourages comparison according to specific traits, much like Plutarch’s formal syncrises set out precisely the grounds on which two men are to be compared, and then provide fairly succinct and clear judgements.

Suetonius’ biographies are certainly less complex from a literary perspective, but they do allow for the revelation and interpretation of character in the narrative sections as well as in the sections arranged by category. As an example, let us look to the death scenes of Julius Caesar and Nero. In narrating Caesar’s death (Caes. 82), Suetonius establishes several characteristics of how a good (or, perhaps, a brave or dignified) emperor meets his end, and he uses this model to cast Nero as the opposite. In the first Life, Caesar attends a meeting of the senate despite warnings of the conspiracy against him, and when he realizes that he is under attack, resists only until he understands that he cannot prevail. Then he lets out a single groan and utters his famous line, in Greek, ‘you, too, my child,’ when Brutus approaches. With this statement he was probably not expressing surprise at Brutus’ involvement in the plot as is usually thought, but rather predicting revenge, since these words come from a line of Greek poetry (’you too will one day taste of power’) that had become proverbial. Caesar’s abbreviated quotation promises that Brutus, though victorious in the present moment, will likewise suffer defeat (see Woodman 2006: 182–183). Finally, in the process of accepting over twenty wounds, he covers his head and groin area with his toga so that he may fall and lie dead with dignity.

In comparison, Nero’s death (Nero 48–49) depicts just the opposite sort of emperor. When Nero realizes that the army has abandoned him, he seeks a remote place to hide (Caesar met publicly with the senate despite warnings of conspiracy), placing a faded cloak (not the more formal toga) over his head to obscure his identity (not to maintain his dignity). After travelling on foot through the woods, he enters an isolated villa through a narrow trench, crawling on all fours (not standing to meet his attackers). As he cowards in fear and learns that he is to be punished by beating, he decides to attempt suicide (again refusing to meet his attackers), but upon testing the blades of his knives, refuses to go through with it (Caesar accepted twenty-three stab wounds). Finally, when it becomes clear that his capture is imminent, he almost musters enough courage for suicide. Like Caesar, he quotes a line of Greek poetry, from the Iliad: ‘The thunder of swift-footed horses besets my ears’ (10.535), but unlike Caesar, who promised posthumous revenge, Nero emphasizes his utter loss of power. Then, he stabs a dagger into his throat, but not without the help of his private secretary (Caesar faced death alone). Finally, not quite dead, he speaks to a centurion who feigns assistance, saying, ‘too late’ and ‘this is fidelity’ (in addition to quoting
a line of poetry, Caesar groaned just once, after the first strike, and understood perfectly well what Brutus was doing).

As this reading shows, Caesar’s death both serves as a conclusion to Caesar’s own life and provides an example against which to judge Nero’s demise. Thus, Suetonius, despite taking on a radically different organizational structure, nonetheless follows the pattern of Nepos and Plutarch, offering individual Lives that can stand on their own while at the same time enriching the character portraits he draws by providing comparative readings across his series.

**Conclusion**

The assembling of individual Lives into collections is one of the fundamental characteristics of biographical writing, and as far back as Herodotus, collections of Lives have encouraged comparative readings. In *On Foreign Generals*, Nepos expects his readers to notice the virtues of individuals, while at the same time comparing them to each other and to the virtues of Roman generals, both past and present. Plutarch goes a step further, deliberately pairing Greek and Roman Lives, which effectively makes syncretis fundamental to the reading process, and even providing a formal exercise in syncretis at the end of many of his books. And Suetonius, by arranging the information in his Lives according to category and revisiting common themes across his *Caesars*, similarly asks his reader to be thinking comparatively even as they focus on an individual Life. Antiquarian interests or the need to preserve a teacher’s wisdom may have been the inspiration for collections of Lives, but the three major biographers from Antiquity exploited the idea of collections to create coherent series, within which the themes and lessons of the individual Lives are enriched when they are considered as parts of a much larger whole.

**Further Reading**

In addition to the works cited above, the following studies are useful in considering individual and collected Lives. Horsfall (1989) modifies his earlier negative assessment of Nepos as a scholar, but is still critical of the historical and literary value of his works. Manuwald (2003) gives an intertextual reading of Nepos’ *Epaminondas* and *Pelopidas*, demonstrating, as does Stem (2012: 162–229), the thematic unity of *On Foreign Generals*. The volume edited by Nikolaidis (2008) considers thematic connections between Plutarch’s *Lives* and his *Moralia*, setting the individual Lives into a context even larger than the series of *Parallel Lives* itself. Many of the essays by Stajer (2014a) explore the implications of collecting and juxtaposing Lives; see especially Chapters 18 (‘Paradoxical Paradigms’) and 20 (‘Parallels in Three Dimensions’). Power and Gibson (2014) have published a collection of essays that provide the first new assessment of Suetonius in English since Wallace-Hadrill (1983).
CHAPTER 4

POPULAR BIOGRAPHY

IOANNIS M. KONSTANTAKOS

THE TEXTS AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

The term ‘popular literature’, first used by literary historians in the mid-nineteenth century, is applied to a range of modern writings produced to entertain a mass audience, usually in the context of an organized commercial industry. In practice, the concept of popular literature is hard to define, given that it is not restricted to any particular genre. The most successful scholarly approaches avoid general definitions and focus rather on the inherent features of form, content, and manner of reception that are shared by the various individual specimens of popular writing. This kind of descriptive approach, though not suitable for theoretical abstractions, is at least of practical use when defining the set of traits that serve as the common denominator of popular literary products. The hallmark of the popular aesthetic, as many theorists have noted, is the primacy of content over form. This may be manifested through a number of interconnected features, such as a straightforward narrative, plain language, simple characterization, and a loose overall structure.

One may doubt whether the category of popular literature is applicable to the ancient world, which had nothing comparable to the cheap book production, widespread literacy, and mass reading public of modern societies. Nonetheless, ancient literary output does include works that offer extensive analogies with the types of writing recognized as popular in our contemporary world. Such similarities provide the best justification for acknowledging the existence of some form of popular literature in Antiquity. From this point of view, modern mass-market literature can be regarded as the development of pre-existing kinds of written production, traceable in every literate culture of the past.

The Graeco-Roman texts usually categorized by modern Classical scholars as ‘popular’ comprise a variety of genres, such as collections of fables, jokes, and marvels, handbooks of fortune-telling, and anonymous folk poetry. One particular group among them, consisting

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1 Good discussions of modern popular literature are offered by Neuburg (1977), Petronio and Schulz-Buschhaus (1979), Couégnas (1992), and Migozzi (1997).
of extensive narrative compositions (novels), draws heavily on biographical patterns. Popular novels, whether romantic, such as Xenophon’s *Ephesiaca*, or adventurous, such as *The History of Apollonius King of Tyre*, or comic, such as *Lucius or the Ass*, tend to offer a linear narration of the life story of one or two central characters. However, such works differ from conventional biographies in two respects. First, rather than covering the entire lifespan of their protagonists, they focus on a particular important period of it that is full of adventures and vicissitudes. And, second, their heroes are invented characters, not historical figures.

Nevertheless, a few of the ancient popular narrative works can properly be termed biographies, in that they recount in full the lives of renowned historical persons or of figures generally regarded as historical by the ancients. These are the Lives of Aesop, Homer, the philosopher Secundus, and the so-called *Alexander Romance*. All these texts have many features in common that reveal strong affinities between them and justify their inclusion in the same category. Whether we should label this category of writings ‘popular biography’ or not is of secondary importance. The main issue is to recognize the close kinship of all its specimens, which collectively represent a particular way of narrating a person’s life. The aim of the following survey of the basic traits shared by these works is not to establish absolute criteria that show whether any one composition is ‘popular’ or not. Rather it is to trace in an empirical manner the peculiar physiognomy of this type of ancient biographical writing.

The popular biographies in question employ a straightforward style of storytelling, generally devoid of complex techniques and innovative formal effects. They are fond of the repetition of stereotypes and familiar patterns. Their language is mostly plain, without sustained use of elaborate style. Occasionally, the writer may indulge in rhetorically elevated passages (e.g. the bucolic ecphrasis in the *Life of Aesop* 6, which imitates the mannerisms of the Second Sophistic) or insert quotations from poetry (e.g. the epic verses in the Lives of Homer). In such cases, the result is often clumsy, perhaps because the author is unfamiliar with this mode of expression.

In terms of content, the texts appeal to the basic urges of the human psyche. The adventures of the biographee abound in sensational incidents and tales of wonder or horror. Comic episodes often include coarse sexual or scatological humour. A naivety of outlook and morality prevails, emphasizing simple emotions. The biographees themselves, along with the other characters involved in their life stories, are not depicted as complex multifaceted personalities. They mostly represent one-dimensional types, distinguished by a single prominent trait, such as cunning, conceit, or treachery, which unifies their various appearances. This does not mean that they cannot be impressive and memorable, just as heroes of modern popular fiction can be (e.g. Passepartout or Arsène Lupin).

The structure of the biographical narrative is usually conglomerate and non-organic. A string of loosely connected episodes, giving the impression of independent tales haphazardly assembled together, follows the protagonist’s career from birth (or youth) to death and sets out in linear fashion his various exploits or mishaps. The arrangement of the episodes may follow an underlying and carefully constructed plan, as is the case with the *Life of Aesop* (see Holzberg 1992). This plan, however, is based on strategies typical of folk tradition, such as pattern repetition, symmetrical contrast, and organization of material in triads. It differs from the well-crafted artistic plot in which events consequentially evolve out of each other ‘according to plausibility or necessity’ in the Aristotelian sense (Arist. *Po.* 1451a38). Temporality is often vague. Imprecise statements (‘some days later’, ‘on another
occasion’) link one incident to the next, as happens in folktales. The conception of space may also be underdeveloped. The locations of the biographee’s adventures, even when they are given historical names, rarely display any local colour. The events might equally well occur in another place without substantial alteration.

As regards textual tradition, ancient popular biographies are mostly anonymous and characterized by a fluidity of transmission. They do not consist of a fixed text, faithfully reproduced in all extant sources. Copyists treated them with freedom, altering the style, expanding or abridging the plot, and adding or eliminating episodes as they saw fit. As a result, popular biographies are preserved in a number of variant redactions, which share the same rudimentary storyline, but vary considerably in terms of diction and the particulars of the action. Individual recensions may have been composed over successive ages, but in some cases there is evidence for the contemporaneous parallel circulation of different versions. Experts sometimes use the terms ‘open text’ or ‘open tradition’ for such cases of polymorphic transmission (Konstan 1998).

Most of these ancient works enjoyed an extensive appeal over large areas and periods of time. They were translated into many languages and widely diffused in both East and West. The Life of Aesop was rendered into Turkish, Slavic languages, Latin, and many European vernacular tongues. The Alexander Romance (on which see Chapter 16 in this volume) and the Life of Secundus underwent similar adventures. Many of these versions were in continuous circulation during the Middle Ages, up to the dawn of the modern era. Such writings represent the closest thing to an ‘international bestseller’ that the ancient world produced. Their best analogues are found in certain narrative compositions of the ancient Orient, which have enjoyed an equally large multilingual success over time. Significantly, some of these Near Eastern texts, such as the Tale of Ahiqar and the Book of Sindbad, employ a biographical framework.

Finally, popular biographies draw heavily on the materials of folk storytelling. They revolve around protagonists who, apart from their actual or presumed historical existence, had also become legendary personages, in that a number of folk legends concerning their exploits had grown up around them. A popular biography constructs its storyline largely on such legends. It also incorporates other tales current in the folk tradition. The biographee thus appears in many traditional roles of the oral storytelling repertoire: the cunning trickster outwitting his adversaries, the picaresque or travelogue hero who roams the world and experiences extraordinary adventures, the wise apophthegmatic advisor, or the central character of a ‘hero myth’ working his way from illegitimate birth or an irregular childhood to glory.

Thus, the account of the biographee’s life becomes a kind of framework that attracts all manner of folk material, from folktales and fables to proverbs and riddles. Because of this tendency, the ancient popular biographies appear to be composite, heterogeneous works, pieced together from earlier autonomous traditions. In some cases, they even incorporate large portions from other independently circulating books. A summary of the Near Eastern Tale of Ahiqar has been inserted into the Life of Aesop; the Alexander Romance has absorbed various novelistic or pseudo-historical writings about the Macedonian conqueror. The ‘patchwork-like’ composition of the narrative may have encouraged later copyists to take considerable liberties with these works and to remove individual episodes or interpolate new materials borrowed from diverse textual or oral sources.
Early Traditions about the Seven Sages

As is the case with the entire Graeco-Roman genre of biography, popular biography has its roots in the late Archaic and the Classical age (sixth to fourth century bc). During this period, the Greeks developed legends about famous men, in particular, great cultural figures, such as the poets Homer and Hesiod, the fabulist Aesop, and the so-called Seven Sages—the last of whom offer an instructive case of a primordial biographical tradition in the making. The Seven were a loosely composed group of men renowned for their intelligence, all of them conventionally placed in the same period, the early sixth century bc. They embodied a type of practical wisdom, expressed through gnomic sagacity and possessing a prominent public dimension. Most of them were active in political life as statesmen or counsellors of rulers. The identity of the members of the group varies according to the sources. There never was a definitive catalogue prohibiting further alterations. This absence clearly illustrates the open tradition of competing versions which characterizes the collective legendarium of the Seven Sages. Nevertheless, five names recur in most inventories, thereby forming a standard core: Thales of Miletus, Bias of Priene, Solon of Athens, Pittacus of Mytilene, and Chilon of Sparta.

The life stories of the sages presumably started as separate local traditions. Each region exalted its native cultural hero, narrating his particular feats of wit. Eventually, a circle of seven was compiled, possibly under the influence of the Delphic sanctuary, which brought together the independent local traditions and merged them into a pan-Hellenic ‘collegium’ of wisdom (Busine 2002). The impact of oriental lore may also have been important. Mesopotamian myth knew of seven sages (apkallū) who lived before the Deluge and taught all knowledge to mankind. The Vedas and subsequent Sanskrit literature refer to an analogous company of seven wise seers (ṛśīs), who were both religious ascetics and rulers or advisors of kings (Reiner 1961; R.P. Martin 1993). Archaic Ionia and the eastern Aegean islands were ideally positioned to receive such influences, as they maintained contact with the kingdoms of the Asiatic hinterland, as far as Babylon itself. It is no coincidence that several of the standard members of the Seven (Thales, Bias, and Pittacus) originated from these areas.

After the formation of the group, narratives regarding their common activities also developed. The sages were shown displaying their wisdom at a communal banquet. They assembled at Delphi, in order to dedicate their precepts to Apollo, or at Croesus’ court, where they conversed with the Lydian despot. Herodotus, although he never directly refers to a circle of Seven Sages, nevertheless associates most of its individual members with Croesus. Bias, Pittacus, Solon, and Thales offer the Lydian king prudent advice or ingenious solutions to problems (1.27, 29–33, 75). The most celebrated tale revolves around a valuable tripod or cup prescribed as a prize for the wisest man. This was first offered to Thales, but he forwarded it to another member of the company, whom he deemed worthier of the honour. The second candidate sent the item to a third one, and so on, until the prize made the round of all seven savants, who finally dedicated it to Apollo, the wisest of the gods. During the Classical period, all these traditions must have circulated predominantly by
word of mouth.3 The occasional references by historians and prose writers (such as Herodotus, Plato, and Ephorus) offer glimpses of this wide repertoire of legends, which altogether form an oral popular biography of the Seven Sages.

The tale of the prize for wisdom, with its multiple variants, offers a good example of an open folk tradition.4 In some versions of the story, the precious item is a tripod hauled up by fishermen. The Delphic oracle then commands that it be awarded to the wisest of men. Elsewhere the object is a golden bowl, bequeathed by the wealthy Bathycles or dispatched to Greece by Croesus. Some of the variable details may go back to competing regional versions. Usually the item is dedicated to Apollo at Delphi, but alternative accounts mention the Apollo of Didyma or Thebes instead. One narrative presents the people of Argos, who erect the tripod as an award for wisdom. According to another variant, the object is fished up off Attica and the Athenian assembly decide its destiny. Often Thales is the first to receive the prize, though some versions privilege Bias, Pittacus, or the Spartans Aristodemus and Chilon instead. Such diversity of alternative, parallel forms corresponds, at the level of oral dissemination, to the fluid textual transmission of multiple recensions, which characterizes later written popular biographies, such as the Life of Aesop and the Alexander Romance.

In their life stories, the sages are cast in various standard roles of the folktale repertoire. On many occasions they are shown propounding or solving riddles (Konstantakos 2005), especially the so-called ‘riddles of the superlative’, which ask what thing or person possesses a certain quality to the utmost degree. Solon, in his famous confrontation with Croesus (Hdt. 1.29–33, on which see Chapter 3 in this volume), expounds exactly this type of question (‘Who is happiest?’). The legend of the tripod or cup reflects the same kind of conundrum but reverses the usual pattern. The superlative question (‘Who is wisest?’), instead of being put to the sages themselves, is asked about them. The famous riddle-solvers now themselves become the object of a riddle, and their agon is an inverted contest in wisdom, in which everyone strives to avoid first place. Such preoccupation with riddles, already familiar from the Near Eastern Ahiqar, is still evident in later specimens of popular biography, such as the Lives of Aesop and Homer.

Often the sages deceive their opponents through the clever manipulation of language or through cunning stratagems. Solon and Chilon tell lies to achieve political or personal aims; Pittacus and Bias trick the enemies of their cities during wartime.5 In most cases, these wiles are used for the good of the community and this prevents the hero from appearing as an amoral picaresque figure. The influence of the tricksters of folktales is nonetheless perceptible. Bias is also distinguished as speaker in court and as an arbitrator. He cleverly settles a long-standing dispute between the states of Priene and Samos concerning contested territory (D.L. 1.84; Arist. F 576; V. Rose 1886: 356–357). He thus recalls another favourite figure of popular novellas, the perspicacious judge, as we also find him in, for example, the

3 The indications for the existence of a written composition (e.g. a Symposium of the sages) already in the fifth century bc are slight and equivocal; see Snell (1966: 115–118) and R.P. Martin (1993: 113–114). Later, the stories were collected in biographical writings by Hermippus (FGrHist 1026 F 9–20), Diogenes Laertius (Lives of Eminent Philosophers), and Plutarch (Life of Solon, Banquet of the Seven Sages).
4 See the accounts of Diogenes Laertius (1.27–33) and Plutarch (Sol. 4), who compile information from many earlier sources.
5 See Plu. Sol. 8, 10, 14.2; D.L. 1.46–48, 71, 74, 83.
legend of Solomon and its folk retellings. Thales is cast in the comic type of the absent-minded intellectual (Pl. Tht. 174a).

Some narratives reflect well-known folk story-patterns. Bias assists the Egyptian Pharaoh Amasis in a riddle-contest against the ruler of Ethiopia (Plu. Conv. 151a–e). Such intellectual competitions between kings formed a common tale-type in western Asia and Egypt during the second and first millennia BC. The royal hero in such stories is usually helped by a counsellor, who solves the opponent’s riddles or invents problems of his own. Amasis’ adventure was apparently based on an Egyptian legend, onto which Greek tradition grafted the figure of Bias in the role of the counsellor (Konstantakos 2004). The story of the cup, which brings together a fellowship of heroes around a sacred vessel, has been compared to the myth of the Grail (Yoshida 1965; R.P. Martin 1993).

Another seminal element in these legends is the fusion of the biographical framework with extensive pieces of wisdom literature. The Seven Sages were famous for their precepts, of which various collections were compiled in Antiquity. These maxims, reflecting an age-old folk wisdom, also became the object of an open tradition with many different recensions, transmitted in medieval manuscripts or on ancient inscriptions. The collected sayings were inserted at an appropriate point in the life story of the sages; the wise men gather at Delphi and jointly consecrate the maxims at the temple of Apollo. The conjunction of the biographical narrative with a collection of adages is a hallmark of Near Eastern wisdom compositions, such as Ahiqar and the demotic Egyptian Instruction of ‘Onchsheshonqy. The same mixture recurs later in the Lives of Aesop and of Secundus. In all of these texts, the series of maxims is said to have been uttered or written down by the central figure at some point in his life.

The traditions of the Seven Sages exercised notable influence on subsequent biographical writings (Wehrli 1973). Their chreia-like anecdotes, which show the protagonist pronouncing a pithy apothegm within a particular narrative frame, provided a model for the structure of Socratic and later philosophical Lives, from Xenophon’s Memorabilia to Diogenes Laertius (on which see Chapters 9 and 19 respectively). Their banquet may have inspired the sympotic scenery of several biographical anecdotes in the Epidemai by Ion of Chios (Chapter 7 in this volume) and the literary symposia of Socratic authors. Finally, some of their stories were assimilated into the Life of Aesop.

The Life of Aesop

This biographical novel about the famous fabulist was composed in the first or second century AD and written in simple but lively language, an unruly form of the colloquial Greek Koinē. This is clearly reflected in the oldest and most genuine of the extant redactions, G, which survives in a single manuscript. Here the work bears the title Book of the philosopher Xanthus and his slave Aesop, concerning Aesop’s mode of life, which recalls the long-winded titles of later popular romances. Another version, W, compiled in early Byzantine times, rewrites the text in a more erudite style and has removed certain

6 Cf. e.g. the Spanish picaresque novel The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes and of His Fortunes and Adversities (1554); or Rabelais’ The Horrible and Terrifying Deeds and Feats of the Very Renowned Pantagruel King of the Dipsodes, Son of the Great Giant Gargantua (1532).
irreverent elements of the narrative. Nonetheless, this later version occasionally preserves ancient details, which presumably derive from the prototypical work, but were omitted from G. Many of its codices offer the conventional title Life (βίος) of Aesop the philosopher. A number of papyrus fragments have also been discovered that date from the second/third to the seventh century AD. Their texts are not identical verbatim either with the G or with the W. It seems that shortly after its initial composition the transmission of the Life became fluid and complex, with several variant forms in parallel circulation.

At the beginning of the narrative, Aesop is introduced as a mute and extremely ugly Phrygian slave, working in the fields in an unspecified place. His fellow-slaves take advantage of his dumbness to frame him for their own misdemeanours; but Aesop manages to avoid misfortune thanks to his innate cleverness. His fate changes when he helps a wandering priestess of Isis to find her way. In return for his piety, Isis and the Muses grant him the power of speech and the talent of storytelling. The estate manager can no longer stand the now caustic Aesop, who is consequently sold to a slave-trader. Thus begin the hero’s journeys, interspersed with many humorous episodes, in which he displays his practical wisdom. He is eventually sold to Xanthus, a professor of philosophy on Samos, who represents the type of the conceited pedant. The large central part of the Life narrates Aesop’s adventures in this man’s service. The cunning slave plays many jokes on his master, thereby mocking Xanthus’ inanity, although he cannot always escape corporal punishment. Nonetheless, Aesop also saves Xanthus from embarrassing situations, providing answers for hard problems which the philosopher cannot solve himself. In the end, Aesop resourcefully wins his freedom in a public assembly of the Samians by interpreting an enigmatic portent, which predicts an attack to be launched by the powerful King Croesus. At this critical juncture, Aesop offers valuable counsel to the Samian people; he also travels to Croesus’ court, impresses the hostile monarch with his eloquence, and reconciles him with Samos.

Afterwards, Aesop becomes an itinerant sophist, eventually reaching Babylon. There he becomes the confidant of King Lycorus, whom he helps to win wisdom contests against other monarchs. This portion of the work is adapted from the Tale of Ahiqar, an Aramaic composition of the late seventh or early sixth century BC concerning the adventures of a wise Assyrian vizier. The author of the Life must have read Ahiqar either in a Greek translation or in some Near Eastern version (in Aramaic or Demotic Egyptian). Like Ahiqar, Aesop is unjustly accused by his adoptive son before the king and condemned to death, but saved and hidden by the friendly executioner. Finally, he is brought back and reinstated in order to solve the difficult riddles with which Nectanebo, the Egyptian Pharaoh, has challenged Lycorus. Aesop triumphs in this intellectual competition, gaining tribute and gifts from Egypt. Finally, the hero continues his wanderings, leaving Babylon and visiting Delphi. The stingy locals offer him no remuneration for his lectures and so Aesop mocks them. As a result, the angry Delphians frame him, hiding a sacred temple bowl in his luggage, and sentence him to death for sacrilege. Aesop’s clever fables cannot help him now; he is led to the precipice for execution and jumps to his death, cursing his persecutors. Afterwards, the Delphians are punished with a plague and obliged to expiate Aesop’s murder.

Most of the ingredients of this narrative are drawn from earlier tradition, largely from orally transmitted folk materials. Biographical legends about Aesop, already current in the
Classical period, form the skeleton of the plot. Aristotle names Xanthus as one of Aesop’s owners; he also describes how Aesop addressed the Samian assembly and acquired fame through his wise fables and advice (Rh. 1393b23–1394a2; F 573; V. Rose 1886: 355). The writings of the Samian historian Euagon (fifth century BC) may have contained much material concerning Aesop’s adventures in Samos (FGrHist 535 F 4). Herodotus, who also spent time on the same island, reports on Aesop’s servitute there (2.134). It thus seems that the rudiments of Aesop’s biography rest on early Samian legends.

The hero’s death at Delphi was also part of the tradition. The Delphians’ false charges of sacrilege and their judicial murder of Aesop are mentioned in several Classical sources.\(^7\) Another early feature, which is amusingly exploited in the Life, was Aesop’s ugliness. A famous red-figured Attic kylix of the mid-fifth century BC portrays a deformed man, with a disproportionately large head set on a gaunt body, who converses with a seated fox. It is generally thought that this painting depicts Aesop together with a typical protagonist of his animal fables.\(^8\) Aesop’s deformity gives special point to Herodotus’ story (2.134) that the fabulist served as a slave alongside Rhodopis, a lovely woman who eventually became a desirable hetaira. Their master thus held in his household one of the most beautiful women and one of the ugliest men in the world, a combination familiar from many myths and folktales (Konstantakos 2012).

The legend of Aesop’s death reflects the primordial ritual of the pharmakos, a form of human sacrifice in which the victim plays the role of the scapegoat.\(^9\) The pharmakos was chosen in times of adversity or crisis from the lowest stratum of society, from slaves, condemned criminals, or deformed cripples. His function was to shoulder symbolically the evils of the community and in doing so purify it. He was led outside the city in procession and beaten, stoned, or thrown over a precipice to die. In addition to the case of Aesop, the same storyline underlies the myth of the murder of Neoptolemus at Delphi. Neoptolemus desecrated Apollo’s altar in Troy, thereby making the god extremely angry. Consequently, while Neoptolemus was visiting the Delphic oracle, Apollo caused him to be violently slaughtered, either by the local inhabitants or by the temple attendants. Significantly, Apollo’s enmity is also a central theme in the Life, which runs throughout the narrative.\(^10\) Aesop actively offends Apollo and in retaliation the wrathful god incites the people of Delphi to trap and kill him. According to other ancient stories, the sons of a certain Phamis met a similar end. A local man of Delphi planted a sacred vessel among their belongings, causing them to be thrown over the precipice as temple-robbers.\(^11\) There was, therefore, apparently an entire cycle of ancient tales based on the story-pattern of the pharmakos. The motif of the incriminating hidden cup is also paralleled in the biblical novella of Joseph (Gen 44; Grottanelli 1987). All these old biographical traditions, which provide the broad outline of the Life, are woven from traditional materials.

As for the figure of the protagonist, this is fleshed out with abundant borrowings from other genres that exercised a wide appeal. Aesop combines the cunning protagonist of

\(^10\) See Chapters 33, 100, 123, and 127 in the G.
comedy, the ironical sage of Greek anecdotes, the wise counsellor of oriental wisdom literature, and the sharp-witted hero of folktales. While in servitude, Aesop regularly acts like the wily slave of New Comedy, concocting schemes to foil his master. His exuberant brio also recalls the Aristophanic heroes, who impose their personal vision on their environment thanks to their inexhaustible vitality. Like them, Aesop unites the animal and the divine in a paradoxical amalgam. His grotesque ugliness makes him resemble a beast. Indeed, he is repeatedly compared to animals by those who behold him. On the other hand, from the very start, he is under the divine protection of Isis and the Muses and his life and career are exalted through a series of monuments that raise him to the level of the gods. In Samos and Babylon, his statue is erected among effigies of the Muses (100, 123). Even the Delphians, in expiation for his murder, erect a temple and a stele in his honour (W 142).

The narrative frequently attaches to the figure of Aesop anecdotes which originally concerned other figures of Greek cultural tradition, in particular, the Seven Sages, Diogenes, and Socrates. Aesop thus appears in the role of the ironical apopthegmatic sage found in such tales, who displays a ready wit in various situations, silencing his adversaries with caustic repartee. For example, in Chapter 66, Aesop encounters an enormous crowd at the public baths, but discovers among the multitude only one person intelligent enough to deserve the name of man. A very similar story is told of the Cynic Diogenes (D.L. 6.40). The scene at the slave market, in which Xanthus purchases Aesop (23–27), is inspired by the famous novella narrating how Diogenes was sold into slavery.12 The Seven Sages, in particular, were associated with Aesop from at least the fourth century bc. Aesop was shown conversing with them at Croesus’ court and elsewhere.13 Plutarch makes him participate in their banquet at Corinth. The Life, rather than directly include this established tradition, creatively exploits it by transforming narratives about the sages into adventures of Aesop. For instance, Aesop’s reconciliation of Croesus and the Samians (98–100) is an adaptation of a story about Bias or Pittacus, who persuades the Lydian king to abandon his plans for war against the Greek islands (Hdt. 1.27). Aesop helps Xanthus to deal with the impossible task of drinking the sea (69–73), just as Bias solves the same riddle on behalf of Pharaoh Amasis (Plu. Conv. 151a–e).

In the section based on Ahiqar, Aesop’s personality assimilates another model of wisdom, namely, the oriental courtier who offers advice and prudent maxims. Here, in imitation of its Near Eastern exemplar, the biographical narration incorporates a portion of wisdom literature. Once reinstated, Aesop summons his treacherous adopted son and addresses to him a series of moral maxims regarding the appropriate behaviour in various situations (109–110). These precepts are ultimately based on an analogous collection in Ahiqar, used there by the sagacious vizier for the education of his adoptive child. In the Life, however, the oriental sayings are creatively adapted to the forms and themes of Greek gnomological tradition.

Finally, throughout the Life, Aesop solves riddles and related problems. Thanks to this ability, he rises from slavery, first gaining honours as a public benefactor in Samos and then triumphing as a vizier at Babylon. Aesop thus resembles many astute figures of the folk

12 See Konstantakos (2003). Echoes of vulgarized Cynic doctrine are common in ancient popular biographies, see Adrados (1978).