

Toher, M. (ed. & tr.) 2017. *Nicolaus of Damascus: The Life of Augustus and The Autobiography, Edited with Introduction, Translations, and Historical Commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xi + 488. ISBN 9781107075610. US\$160.

Mark Toher's new edition of Nicolaus of Damascus' *Life of Augustus (Bios Kaisaros)* is a scholarly masterpiece and deserves a prize. Any scholar of the late Roman Republic and age of Augustus, or of classical historiography and biography, will wish to have a personal copy.

Historians have long recognized the importance of the *Life* as a source. Six excerpts of it survive, part of an encyclopedia of historical knowledge commissioned in the tenth century by the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. Five of the excerpts deal with the early training (ἀγωγή) of Augustus, while the much longer sixth is focused on Julius Caesar's assassination and its aftermath. Nicolaus' account of the conspiracy against Caesar is more detailed than any other to survive and has unique information essential for reconstructing the chronology of the days following the Ides of March, 44 BCE. The account of Augustus' childhood contains similarly unique material. As Toher notes (p. 178), it is only Nicolaus who indicates that after the death of Augustus' father (when Augustus was just four) and his mother Atia's subsequent remarriage, the young boy lived with his grandmother, a sister of Julius Caesar. If we believe Nicolaus, the future Augustus was raised from 58 to 51 BCE primarily by her, and this prompts reflection on what kind of introduction to Roman politics and history he would have received from this more senior woman.

What historians have appreciated far less, until Toher's work, is the opportunity Nicolaus' *Life* furnishes to see Augustus through the eyes of an intelligent and ultimately highly-placed provincial almost exactly coeval with the *princeps*. Born into a leading family of Damascus, Nicolaus was given a thorough education and became particularly fond of Aristotelian philosophy. As a young man, he taught the children of Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra, an opportunity probably owed to King Herod of Judea. By 20 BCE, Nicolaus was in Herod's entourage, witnessing Augustus' famous reception of the Indian ambassadors, and in subsequent years he became a top advisor to the king and brokered relations with Augustus and Agrippa. When Augustus broke off his friendship with Herod, it was Nicolaus who traveled to Rome in 8 BCE and retrieved Herod's position. But back in Judea, rivalry among 'friends of the king' such as Nicolaus as well as Herod's family members became dangerous, while Herod himself grew more paranoid. As Toher emphasizes in his excellent Introduction to this edition (pp 1-64), Nicolaus' experience in this court, as much as his study of Greek philosophy, informed his later work. After Herod's death in 4 BCE, Nicolaus returned to Rome to make a plea on behalf of Herod's son Archelaus, and Toher suggests that Nicolaus remained in Rome for some time, perhaps now writing the *Life of Augustus* as well as his own *Autobiography*. Having already composed a universal history for Herod, Nicolaus had good scholarly credentials – and he had shrewdly taken the opportunity of sending Augustus a delicious type of date, which the *princeps* took to calling νικόλαος ('nicolaos').

Along with the fascinating story of Nicolaus' life, other subjects tackled in Toher's introduction include the dating of the *Bios Kaisaros*, its themes, and its narrative technique. Jacoby, whose edition of the *Bios* in his *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*¹ laid an essential foundation, dated the *Bios* to the late 20s, assuming 'that the *Bios* was closely derived from Augustus' autobiography, which was probably published not long after 25 BC' (p. 23). Toher makes compelling arguments for a later dating, after 4 BCE, and in doing so articulates a key methodological point: 'the ghost of a lost work ought not to define how an extant text is understood' (p. 26). As Toher repeatedly shows, while the (now lost) autobiography of Augustus no doubt was an important source for Nicolaus, the preoccupations of the *Bios Kaisaros* are those of Nicolaus himself. In recounting the early training of Augustus, Nicolaus to some extent relied on *topoi* of encomiastic biographies written in Greek, but he ultimately draws a more complicated picture. For Nicolaus, a key question, connected with his interest in Aristotelian philosophy, is how the young Augustus acquired experience (ἐμπειρία). The long excursus on Julius Caesar's assassination provides a crucial counterpoint, 'reveal[ing] Great Caesar as naïve (ἄπλοῦς) and unable to perceive the conspiracy forming around him' (p. 34). The conspiracy throws into relief the danger the young Caesar faced, his eventual success in navigating it, and the need for him to move away from some of his earlier, seemingly more praiseworthy qualities.

¹ Jacoby, F. 1926-1930. *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*. Berlin.

A highlight of Toher's introduction is his extended discussion of the likely influence on Nicolaus of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. 'Both Cyrus and Augustus,' Toher observes, 'first intimidated their subjects and then won them over by their sagacious and kindly exercise of power' (p. 44). For Cyrus, a crucial lesson came from his father Cambyses, 'that he must engage in deceit and guile to become a successful commander and leader' (p. 45). But if the *Cyropaedia* guided Nicolaus and enriches our own reading of the *Bios*, Toher argues that the *Bios* is fundamentally accurate. The life of the legendary Persian king provided contemporaries of Augustus, even perhaps Augustus himself, with a framework for thinking about empire and monarchy; on major historical events, Nicolaus did not make gross distortions.

After the extensive introductory materials comes Toher's own text and translation of the *Bios*. As he explains in his preface with typical modesty, the text 'is based on an examination of photocopies of the two codices of the *Bios*, but it differs very little from the texts of de Boor and Büttner-Wobst found in the editio princeps of Constantine's encyclopedia and that of Jacoby' and 'the English translation has no pretense to art or elegance' (x). In my view, the translation is now the best available in English, and the text – along with the subsequent commentary, which has a number notes on textual problems – is an essential resource for anybody using the *Bios*. The rest of my review shall focus on the commentary, but it is important to note that Toher also includes in this volume the excerpts of Nicolaus' *Autobiography* preserved in the *Suda* and Constantine's encyclopedia, with brief commentary on them, and they make for fascinating reading.

The commentary on the *Bios* is superb and has notes of different sorts. One category comprises those that explain, or attempt to explain, Nicolaus' Greek, or the Greek of his excerptor, with useful suggestions on how the excerptor modified the original, sometimes to the point of obscurity. Another category consists of notes that, complementing the introduction, explore Nicolaus' own distinctive approach to the material. Good examples of these include the series of detailed comments on the proem (sections 1-2), which help to explain key words for Nicolaus such as φρόνησις; the note on Nicolaus' use of φασί (pp. 269-70); or the introductory note on section 131, where Toher writes: 'It is notable that N., ever the "Realpolitiker," does not represent Octavian's recruitment of an army as an act done to free the *res publica* from the *dominatio* of Antonius...' (p. 413). The introductory note to sections 24-27 (pp. 207-8) is a *tour de force*. Toher here argues that Nicolaus' account of Octavian in Spain in 45 BCE, including the story of Octavian pleading the cause of the Saguntines before Caesar, may to a large extent be Nicolaus' own creation.

Many notes explain in detail the relationship of the *Bios* to other ancient sources and reflect on its use for historical reconstruction. There are, for example, some fine notes on Caesar's will (pp. 195-96, 218, 314) and on Antonius and Octavian's changing relationship (pp. 393-94). Using Nicolaus, Toher sometimes identifies what are likely to be later embroideries. A note on section 94 (p. 350) makes a good case that Caesar's assassins did not carry the *pilleus* on the spear as they ran through the city after slaying Caesar, as Appian claims. I would add that assuming this is an invention, it might have been inspired by the famous coins issued after the Ides by Brutus (*RRC* 508.3). Another likely later embroidery is Antonius' servile disguise after the murder of Caesar (p. 353). At the same time, some notes suggest how sources later than Nicolaus are more reliable, for example, Appian's account of Octavian's efforts 'to display Caesar's honorific paraphernalia at the *ludi Cereales*' (p. 378). Sometimes notes set out different versions of the same event without attempting to resolve all of the discrepancies (e.g., the note for κατέβαινον...τὸν δῆμον, section 99, pp. 357-58).

There is little if anything to challenge in the commentary. Inevitably a different commentator might have emphasized different points. One could note in section 3 the tendency for legal disputes to arise with the death of the *paterfamilias*.² On section 95 (p. 351), Toher notes that Nicolaus' account of Caesar's death, including the abandoned corpse of Caesar, 'seems to anticipate the pathos and irony in later descriptions of the death of Pompeius.' But could it recall earlier accounts of the death of Pompeius, and of Caesar? As Moles and Morgan have argued, these later accounts of Pompeius likely go back to the histories of Pollio, and it is possible that Nicolaus owes a debt here to Pollio too.³ Occasionally, a further source could be cited, for example, on p. 271, it would be good to mention *Nep. Att.* 8.1 for the importance of both Decimus and Marcus Brutus as well as Cassius, and on p. 181 some reference could be made to the Ciceronian correspondence for precautions taken by Roman families at the outbreak of

² See, e.g., Frier, B. W. 1985. *The Rise of the Roman Jurists: Studies in Cicero's Pro Caecina*. Princeton. Esp. p.37.

³ Moles, J. L. 1982-83. 'Virgil, Pompey, and the *Histories* of Asinius Pollio.' *CW* 76: 237-38. Morgan, L. 2000 'The Autopsy of C. Asinius Pollio.' *JRS* 90: 51-69.

civil war in 49. The only mistake I found was on p. 295: the venue of Cicero's first Catilinarian was not the Temple of Concordia but the Temple of Jupiter Stator. On p. 133, 'Vibias' is a misprint for 'Vibius'.

It is hard to pay adequate tribute to Toher's achievement. Many will consult this book for help on a specific passage, with immense profit. But one could also spend hours working through it, cover to cover, and learn a great deal. I left it with a renewed sense of how much research is still to be done on fundamental sources for Roman political history, especially sources written in Greek. I also left it thinking that when we reinsert Nicolaus, his own life story, and his *Life of Augustus* into Augustan Rome, the picture has a new vibrancy.

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