

The Use and Abuse of Philosophical Successions
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Those who think that philosophy originated among barbarians, writes Diogenes Laertius, “fail to notice that they are attaching to barbarians the accomplishments of the Greeks, with whom not only philosophy, but the human race itself began” (λανθάνουσι δ’ αὐτοὺς τὰ τῶν Ἑλλήνων κατορθώματα, ἀφ’ ὧν μὴ ὅτι γε φιλοσοφία, ἀλλὰ καὶ γένος ἀνθρώπων ἦρξε, βαρβάροις προσάπτοντες, D.L. pr. 3). By contrast, Diogenes’ contemporary, the Christian teacher Clement of Alexandria, makes precisely the opposite argument: not only is Hebrew philosophy older than Greek, but even Greek philosophy is of non-Greek origin (*Strom.* 1.59-73). These sharply divergent conclusions are derived from essentially the same set of data: the traditional succession lists of Greek philosophers. Succession narratives were a historiographic tool much beloved in Mediterranean antiquity: not only philosophers, but doctors, orators, jurists, priests, magicians, rabbis, and bishops used them to certify the antiquity, authenticity, and coherence of their disciplines. Yet, as the disagreement between Diogenes and Clement shows, such lists are anything but a neutral, objective framework for telling the story of a community. Rather, succession lists are carefully wrought, highly fraught specimens of authorizing discourse. The legitimizing work that rabbinic and Christian succession narratives do has increasingly been recognized (Cohen 1980; Boyarin 2005), but the sophistication and audacity with which secular pagan authors deployed succession lists has been less often appreciated. Using Diogenes’ handling of the philosophical *diadochai* as a case study, this paper will explore the authorizing functions of secular succession lists, and the subtlety with which pagan authors manipulated this apparently bare-bones historiographic device.

In the hands of Diogenes and Clement, the *diadochai* serve to define and validate not only philosophy itself, but also the wider culture for which each author seeks to claim it. For Diogenes, philosophy is not only primarily, but originally and exclusively Greek; the prestige of both philosophy and Hellenism are thereby enhanced. For Clement, philosophy belongs to the barbarian world — that is, to Christianity. To produce such widely differing results from each other (and from previous writers in the *Successions* genre) requires only delicate adjustments to the starting conditions for Greek philosophy and the biographical traditions surrounding its founders; these small changes are enough to recast the character of Greek philosophy radically. Similarly minute alterations yield similarly far-reaching results in the *On the Divergence of the Academy from Plato* of the second-century Platonist Numenius: he manages to turn Zeno of Citium’s foundation of Stoicism from a natural outgrowth of the Socratic tradition into an unforgivable betrayal of pure Platonism, in large part simply by rearranging the order of Zeno’s teachers. Starting with exactly the same raw material, Numenius, Clement, and Diogenes produce very similar, yet entirely incompatible histories of philosophy, each of which contrives to enhance its author’s intellectual authority, to validate his idiosyncratic conception of what constitutes authentic philosophy, and to legitimate the broader cultural milieu within which he locates philosophy. As it happens, this is a use to which succession narratives are extremely well suited.