Nepos' *Life of Atticus*, Nicolaus' *Life of Augustus*, and the Genre of Political Biography in the

Age of Augustus

This paper will explore the nature of political biography at the end of the Roman

Republic through the examination and comparison of two texts: the *Life of Atticus* by Cornelius

Nepos (written in Latin circa 35-32 BCE) and the *Life of Augustus* by Nicolaus of Damascus

(written in Greek circa 14 CE [?]). The authors' perspective on events was very different

(compare Millar 1988 to Yarrow 2006: 67-76), yet their biographies emphasize notably similar

themes. They have only rarely been compared (Lobur 2008: 81-89, Hägg 2012: 187-204), and

never specifically in terms of their generic relationship. The paper will be structured around

three main rubrics: the context of composition, the depiction of the character of the subjects, and

the delineation of the genre of Roman political biography.

Each biography will be introduced by surveying the central scholarly questions regarding

the form and composition of each. What type of biography is the *Atticus*? When was the

Augustus composed and to what degree did it draw from Augustus' *Autobiography*? How can the

fragments traditionally assigned to the *Augustus* be distinguished from Nicolaus' universal

history? Answers will be defended, but uncertainty acknowledged, and the difference in

biographical scale and political perspective between *Atticus* and *Augustus* will be outlined.

The bulk of the paper will then be devoted to demonstrating the remarkable similarities of

theme and emphasis between the two *Lives*. Although Nepos elucidates Atticus' politics of non-

involvement (Stem 2012: 55-61) while Nicolaus documents Augustus' rise to supreme political

power (Toher 2003), these different stories are presented by delineating the same qualities of

character. Each highlights the *phronesis*/*prudentia* and *arete*/*virtus* of their subjects and

demonstrates their application of these qualities anecdotally, stressing the hallmarks of their

education and their skilled handling of their relationships with family and friends. Intercessions on behalf of friends are especially detailed in both biographies, as well as interactions between the biographical subject and men of greater political status (Caesar in particular).

The final section of the paper will function as its conclusion and argue that the shared emphasis of both biographies on their subjects' qualities of character and the propriety of their political judgment demonstrates the fundamental themes of political biography at Rome (see Geiger 1985: 1-66). The similarity of the biographical method applied to two very different subjects with very different political perspectives reveals how political biography distinguished itself from history by its focus on the character more than the actions of the individual. The ability of political biography to comment on the political questions of the moment is thus dependent more on perspective than on form. Moreover, the degree of thematic overlap between these two works suggests how the generic form of political biography, the origins of which are disputed and uncertain, had become fixed by the end of the Roman Republic.

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