

The Archetypical Tyrant: Nepos' Adaptation of Xenophon's *Hiero* in the *Life of Dion*

In recent years there has been a reevaluation of the biographies of Cornelius Nepos. From Edna Jenkinson's (1973) conclusion that Nepos' worth solely rests on the happenstance that he is the first surviving Latin biographer and Nicholas Horsfall's (1982) condemnation of him as "an intellectual pygmy," scholarship has moved toward a reading that gives more credit not only to the ingenuity of the author, but also to his understanding of the morality and political situation of the late first century B.C. Carlotta Dionisotti (1988) has illuminated the political ideas espoused in his biographies of foreign generals which, she explains, are not only moralizing commentary—as some critics have accused—but philosophical discussion of problems inherent in constitutions and human nature. Through historical biography, Nepos' conception of history pits *libertas* against *tyrannis* and the welfare of the country against that of the individual, and by providing individualized *exempla* of such, Nepos sought to provide some commentary on the ongoing changes in Rome (see Dionisotti 1988 and Stem 2012). Nepos emerges from this understanding as an author whose political voice is worth a listen, and it is in his tragic life of Dion of Syracuse that readers are presented with an entire biography haunted by tyranny.

From the outset, Dion's life is dramatized in the world of Greek Syracuse, and there is no shortage of tyrannical figures. Dionysius I and his son dominate the first half of the biography until the latter's ousting at Dion's hands. From this point, at which one might expect to find Dion lauded as the champion of *libertas*, Nepos immediately proceeds to reconstruct Dion as a third "typical" tyrant. This short life has received very little attention from modern scholars, but it presents the best opportunity to examine Nepos' vision of archetypical tyranny. This construction of tyranny is incredibly akin to another little studied work: the *Hiero* of Xenophon. From the beginning of the dialogue, Simonides asks Hiero to compare his current life as a tyrant

(*turannos*) to his former experiences as a private citizen (*idiôtês*) (1.2), and in a similar manner, the readers of Nepos' *Dion* must consider the title character's life before his rise to eminence in relation to his actions once in power. Throughout the text the tyrannical actions of Dionysius I and II as well as Dion find antecedents in Xenophon's treatise. Familial relationships, forlorn loves, fear of excellent citizens, and lack of true friendship all play prominent roles in both texts.

The first half of Nepos' biography constructs a private model of Dion who, although connected with the court of Dionysius, burns for the philosophic life of Plato. The introduction of the Athenian philosopher must have invited Roman readers into the midst of earlier Greek political discussion. While both Plato and Xenophon shared hopes that tyrants could learn to rule well, or at least harbored hopes for "good" monarchy, Nepos uses his lives, and Dion's in particular, to disagree and show that "it is easy for anyone to understand how individual power (*singularis potentia*) is hated, and it is a miserable life for those who prefer to be feared rather than loved" (*Dion* 9.5).

In presenting *Dion* as a biography of tyranny, Nepos provided a warning for his readers. He wanted his audience to understand that the Greek philosophical discussions on tyranny and enlightened monarchy, were simply that, philosophical discussions. Using Xenophon's own model allowed him to comment on the Greek archetypal tyrant and to construct the *Dion* by selectively adapting his sources. Understanding Nepos' willingness to modify the material he engaged with presents an author certainly able to tailor previous philosophic ideas into his own vision of politics (See Stem 2012). The conclusions on the two works, though they appear radically different, share striking similarities. Nepos' Plato provides the only escape for the tyrant, but this option was also presented to Hiero. In a way, Dion became the test case for Simonides' suggestions presented in the end of the *Hiero*, but Nepos builds up his philosophic

and naturally gifted hero only to show that even he cannot effectively wield power without proper *libertas*.

Bibliography

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