

The Competence of Cornelius Nepos

This paper focuses on contextualizing the widespread historical inaccuracies noticed in Cornelius Nepos' *Lives of the Foreign Commanders*. Standard handbook assessments of this author, in particular by Jenkinson (1967, 1973) and Horsfal (1983)—see further Pryzwansky (2009)—have deprecated these biographies, and argued Nepos was not taken seriously in antiquity or should be taken seriously today. This is likely to have stemmed from the language used in Nipperdey-Witte's (1913) commentary, the only one of any substance, which assessed the work strictly, according to modern objective historical standards. It cannot be stressed enough, however, that this concerns only the *objective* accuracy of the text. I argue that, though certainly marred on occasion by serious errors that could only be due to carelessness, by and large most of the so-called inaccuracies can be accounted for in ways that do not discount this author from having been taken seriously by ancient readers. This opens the door to re-assessing the possible influence of this author in his contemporary world: instead of being a mere mirror of contemporary attitudes, as Dionisotti (1988) and Millar (1988), it is possible Nepos was a cultural expert who helped craft the ideology of the principate. I will show this in two ways: first, by strengthening recent observations (e.g. Stem 2012, Dunsch 2012) regarding Nepos' standing among contemporary luminaries, by highlighting the fragmentary evidence for his reputation and reception. To cite one example (from several), Pliny the younger mentions him twice (*Ep.* 4.28, 5.3) as if he were an author of erudition and cultural *gravitas*. Moreover, when compared to the evidence for Varro and Atticus, it is clear that the latter two had deficiencies comparable to what is observed in Nepos, and thus one might consider that Nepos fit in quite well among them and should

in no way be considered the “odd man out.” Second, I would like to compliment this with an investigation from the other direction -- by means of a source-critical analysis that considers whether modern biases are unjudiciously projected onto Nepos – a danger facing modern assessments of Roman historiography mentioned by Wiseman (1979). Only one work, by Bradley (1991), has engaged in a detailed source-critical analysis of some of the biographies. He is quite correct (and unique) in asserting that “the key to understanding the lives. . . with their. . . innumerable errors. . . lies in the determination of where the author got his material and what in the lives is to be ascribed to him and what to his sources.” Much more can be said on the matter (though the scope of the paper would limit discussion). It can be shown, for example, how several other so-called errors Bradley does not cover seem to go back to Ephorus, Theopompus and Timaeus; a notable example shows that Nepos contradicts Thucydides regarding the scandal of the Herms, but is strongly supported by Andocides (*cf. Nep. Alc. 3.2, Thuc. 6.27 and And. 1.62*). It is equally important to observe that source-comparative analyses show that even when Nepos cannot find support, it is clear that many other sources, in their versions, fared no better than he in their reliability. Moreover, many other of the so-called errors can be shown to have been considered such simply because modern scholars fault Nepos for not writing the work they believe he should have—with a view to their own standards and needs, and with the aid of modern apparatus. Much hairsplitting has been done, but, apart from fine-tuning the narrative with regard to its relation to the wider record, the impact is negligible except that it contributes to the impression that the text is irremediably erroneous. The paper will conclude with a short theory regarding the mode of composition that depicts the author working in a virtuoso fashion, mostly from memory.

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