

Reclaiming Biography: The *Historia Augusta* in the Philosophical Tradition

The *Historia Augusta* (HA) occupies an uncomfortable position in the history of biographical literature, complicated by its own obfuscation of its sources and inspirations. Following the direct references in the HA itself, surveys of biographical literature that include the *Historia Augusta* append it to discussions of Suetonius and other biographers of the first to third centuries AD (Leo 1901, Sonnabend 2002). Meanwhile, a recent survey of biographical literature from the years 250-450 AD, into which the composition of the HA certainly falls, calls Eusebius's *Vita Constantini* the "only substantial example" of historical or political biography, making no mention of the thirty books of imperial biography that make up the HA (Hägg and Rousseau 2000). The consequence of this partitioning has been to leave the *Historia Augusta* out of the productive conversations surrounding the new uses and formats of biographical writing that developed throughout the fourth century. This paper examines the influence of two of the most notable works from the philosophical branch of biography—Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* and Eusebius's *Vita Constantini*—and the ways in which the author of the *Historia Augusta* pivots away from the biographical principles outlined in both to return to a biographical method capable of expressing doubt, hesitation, and failure.

Traces of Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* appear most prominently in the HA biography on Aurelian, not coincidentally the biography in which the author most carefully examines the motives of biography and his decision to write. From the commission by imperial authority to the circumstances under which he found his sources, the author of the HA follows the pattern established by Philostratus for the production of new work (*Hist. Aug.* Aurelian. 1.1-9, Philost. VA 1.3). Further on, he names Apollonius as a positive influence on the emperor

Aurelian, calling attention to the Greek sources on his life, almost certainly meaning Philostratus's own work (Aurelian. 24.8). The HA's debt to Philostratus has been little discussed, a surprising fact considering their similar sentiments concerning the imperial rule, the good and bad examples of rulers, and the excesses of the Roman world (Kemezis 2014). Conversely, the author of the HA also criticizes other biographers for offences of which Philostratus could certainly be considered guilty: prolixity, fascination with diet and clothing, and detailed descriptions of minutia. Although largely approving of the figure of Apollonius, the *Historia Augusta* builds a different brand of biography less focused on a perfect whole, and more on the flawed and partial.

In crafting this de-idealized biographical style, the HA uses the developing features of the philosophical biography found from Philostratus to Eusebius, whose moral debates over biography in the *Vita Constantini* appear echoed in the lives of the HA (Zinsli 2014). The author of the HA shares their propensity for concatenating documentary evidence and displaying the character of the biographical subject through recreations of direct speech, practices used to much lesser extent by the HA's most discussed precursor, Suetonius. Despite this shared methodology and probable debt to Eusebius, Constantine himself becomes one of the colorful figures whose foibles and failings the HA uses to return biography from idealizing a philosophical life to accounting for the good and ill of major political figures.

Placing the *Historia Augusta* back into its literary context shows that the author built from the developments in the biographical genre of the third and fourth centuries AD. Although the trend was shifting to the glorifying hagiographies that would dominate life writings of the Late Antique and Middle Ages, the author of the HA uses the narrative techniques and shared

motivations for writing biography and reclaims them for a more balanced portrait of his varied subjects.

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