

REVIEW

A NEW EDITION OF
NICOLAUS OF DAMASCUS

Mark Toher, *Nicolaus of Damascus: The Life of Augustus and The Autobiography, Edited with Introduction, Translations and Historical Commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 488. Hardback, £105.00/\$160.00. ISBN 978-1-107-07561-0.

Nicolaus of Damascus, Peripatetic philosopher and leading courtier of Herod the Great, was the author of tragedies and comedies (lost), philosophical treatises (partly preserved in Syriac and Arabic versions), and four works of which extensive fragments survive: a vast world history in 144 books, a collection of foreign customs, an autobiography, and a Life of Octavian/Augustus, whom he always calls ‘Caesar’. Excerpts from the autobiography, the first seven books of the history, and the *Life of Augustus* are preserved in that sequence in two of the four surviving volumes of historical excerpts made in the mid-tenth century for the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, namely *On Virtue and Vice* and *On Conspiracies against Rulers*. These excerpts constitute all that survives from the *Life* and almost all that survives from the autobiography.

A substantial part of the proem to the *Life* (1–2) and of the following account of Octavian’s early years (3–36) is preserved in the excerpts *On Virtue and Vice*.¹ The excerpts *On Conspiracies* then provide us with very extended passages from the next part of the work.² These open with Octavian’s reception of the news of the dictator Caesar’s death and his return to Brundisium (37–57). Here Nicolaus inserted an extended excursus on the conspiracy against Caesar, and the excerpt reproduces this up to the day after Caesar’s death (58–106). At this point the excerptor broke off, passing over the rest of Nicolaus’ excursus on the conspiracy and his following treatment of Octavian’s conduct on his return to Rome. The excerpt then resumes to give

¹ Toher, like earlier editors, reckons the Nicolaus extracts in *On Virtue and Vice* as five separate excerpts. However, new excerpts, prefaced as usual by ὄτι, begin only at sections 4 and 36. Sections 1–3 form a single excerpt, broken by the omission of material included in another, now lost Constantinian volume, and we cannot say whether a new excerpt began in the lacuna between 27 and 28.

² All editors treat sections 37–139 as a single, huge excerpt, but a new excerpt in fact begins at 120, after only a short gap (cf. Toher 400–1).

us Nicolaus' account of the breakdown of relations between Antony and Octavian in July to October 44 BCE, concluding with Octavian's recruitment of a private army from the veteran settlements in Campania (107–39). Thus, as Toher notes (425), what survives of Nicolaus' biography ends just at the point at which Augustus began his *Res Gestae*. However, forward indications give us some idea of the scope of the remainder of the work: it showed how Augustus 'came into power' and 'how many deeds of war and peace he performed' once he had achieved it (58: ὅπως τε παρήλθεν εἰς τὴν ἀρχὴν καὶ ... ὅποσα ἔργα πολέμου καὶ εἰρήνης ἀπεδείξατο; cf. 2).

The standard edition of the fragments of Nicolaus' historical and biographical works remains that of Jacoby.³ The corresponding entry in *Brill's New Jacoby* is still awaited. However, a valuable edition with French translation and commentary has recently appeared.⁴ The *Life of Augustus*, Nicolaus' most notable work, has also received a number of individual editions.⁵

Mark Toher's research has centred on Nicolaus and the *Life of Augustus* since his 1985 PhD. He has published a long series of distinguished papers on these and related topics, and his work now reaches fitting culmination in this splendid edition with translation and commentary. Its scale, fullness and depth of treatment, and penetrating insights put it in a different class from its predecessors. This will long remain the definitive treatment of Nicolaus' Augustus biography.

The thorough introduction deals successively with Nicolaus' own life and career (1–21), with various aspects of his biography of Augustus (22–55: sources and date of composition, themes, narrative technique and language, and relation to the encomium tradition), and with the problems posed for students of Nicolaus by the Constantinian Excerpts and their manuscripts (55–63). Next come the text and translation of the surviving fragments of the *Life of Augustus*, followed by very full commentary (155–425). The title's description of this commentary as 'historical' is a fair reflection of the thoroughness with which the many historical questions posed or touched on by Nicolaus' narrative are discussed. The relationship of Nicolaus' version of successive events to those given by other sources is always carefully analysed, and on many such issues Toher's treatment will now serve as a valuable point of reference: notable instances are his treatment of the Lupercalia episode (301–15) and of the assassination itself (335–45). This is not, however, an exclusively historical commentary: historiographical, literary, and linguistic questions also receive full attention and perceptive treatment. Toher's work concludes with the text

³ Jacoby (1926a) and (1926b).

⁴ Parmentier and Barone (2011).

⁵ In English: Hall (1923), Bellemore (1984); German: Malitz (2003); Italian: Turturro (1945), Scardigli and Delbianco (1983); and Spanish: Perea Yébenes (2006).

and translation of the fragments of Nicolaus' autobiography, accompanied by brief commentary (453–7).

The evidence does not enable us to determine what titles, if any, Nicolaus gave his two biographical works (well discussed for the *Life of Augustus* by Toher 155–7). Toher himself uses the convenient short titles *Bios Kaisaros* and *Idios Bios* (hereafter, *BK*, *IB*).

Jacoby's text was based on the still standard editions of the relevant volumes of the Constantinian Excerpts,⁶ and subsequent editors have mostly been content to reproduce Jacoby's text. Toher's text is based on his own collation of photocopies of the manuscripts (only one manuscript survives for each volume of excerpts). This collation has largely confirmed the earlier editors' reports of the manuscript readings, although at one point (336) Toher is able to point out that a reading formerly recorded as a correction in fact stood in the manuscript. His editorial practice is rather more conservative than Jacoby's, and quite a number of divergences result. At a few points where discussion of textual problems is confined to the commentary it would have been more helpful to mark a lacuna in the text (*BK* 63, 119) or obelise (*BK* 79–80). Toher supplies a negative critical apparatus (a positive apparatus would sometimes have been easier to follow), and, like his predecessors, does not always credit corrections to their originators.⁷

Toher's translation succeeds admirably overall in its modest aim (p. x) of providing a clear and accurate rendering of Nicolaus' sometimes tortuous Greek. I noted only a small number of errors: e.g. *BK* 18 *πλείστου τε ἄξιος πολλοῖς* means 'of the utmost value to many' as at 27, rather than 'highly esteemed by many'; 49 *ἀκήρυκτος ἔχθρα* must mean 'implacable' (so other translators) rather than 'latent' enmity; 74 *λέγεται δὲ καὶ ἕτερος λόγος* (Toher: 'yet another rumour spread') is more accurately rendered by Bellemore's 'there is also another version current'.

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Jacoby believed that, except in the excursus on the conspiracy against Caesar, Nicolaus in the *BK* was closely following Augustus' autobiography, and this view has been accepted in most subsequent treatments, leading Gabba, for example, to describe the *BK* as 'a free paraphrase of Augustus' work'.⁸ Toher has argued powerfully against this view in earlier publications, and briefly restates the case here (25–6).⁹ He is certainly right to reject Jacoby's thesis. As

⁶ Büttner-Wobst (1906) and de Boor (1905).

⁷ For the *IB* the apparatus has been oddly distributed across the page (430–48).

⁸ Gabba (1984) 62.

⁹ Especially Toher (2009).

he acknowledges, Augustus' autobiography will have been one of Nicolaus' main sources, just as it was to be, directly or indirectly, for the other accounts of Augustus' early career which have survived to us, and Pollio's history probably served in a comparable fashion for the conspiracy against Caesar. However, no cogent evidence has been adduced for the closer relation between Nicolaus' and Augustus' accounts postulated by Jacoby and his followers. As Toher notes, where other writers such as Appian give divergent accounts of the same episodes, we cannot assume that Nicolaus' version is closer to Augustus' own. It was evidently Nicolaus himself who was responsible for the themes and shaping of his account of Octavian's rise, taking as his model not Augustus' own account, but the Greek encomium tradition.¹⁰

Nicolaus' proem includes clear echoes of that of the most celebrated Greek biographical encomium, Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (1.1.3–6). Toher (44–9) seeks, perhaps overenthusiastically, to identify further parallels between the *Cyropaedia* and what survives of the *BK*, and speculates about how these may have continued in the lost part of the work. However this may be, he provides, both in his introduction (29–38) and across the commentary, an admirable analysis of the ways in which Nicolaus moulds his encomiastic account of the young Octavian's development. A paragon of virtues from the outset, Octavian gradually acquires experience and maturity, learning independence from his revered mother, Atia, and stepfather, Philippus, and, when faced by what Nicolaus presents as Antony's conspiracy against him, recognising the necessity of the resort to force which he had previously abjured. In this way he is shown as avoiding the fate of his mentor Caesar, which Nicolaus remarkably ascribes to his being 'straightforward in nature and inexperienced in political skill because of his campaigns abroad' (*BK* 67: ἀπλοῦς ὦν τὸ ἦθος καὶ ἄπειρος πολιτικῆς τέχνης διὰ τὰς ἐκδήμους στρατείας).

As Toher notes (39), one of the striking features of Nicolaus' narrative is his detailed attention to the motivations of individuals and groups, notably the conspirators against Caesar and their supporters (*BK* 59–65) and later opponents of Octavian (*BK* 109–13). Here he often adopts a stance of cynical realism. While other sources credit the conspirators themselves with sincere devotion to the cause of the Republic, Nicolaus represents this as mere pretext and their true motives as self-interested, although he does allow that some of their sympathisers were partly motivated by resentment at Caesar's overthrow of the 'ancient *demokratia*' (60–1). After the assassination, he assures us, individuals had no concern for the common good, but only for themselves

¹⁰ For a similar view see Pausch (2011), an important discussion not cited by Toher. Although his command of earlier bibliography is impeccable, Toher only rarely cites work published in the last few years. One item which will have appeared too late for citation is Syme's essay on persons named in the *BK*, which Toher was able to consult in the Syme Archive (384, 418, 466) and has now been published as Syme (2016) 206–11.

(103), and subsequently both Cicero and those who thought like him and all the army commanders were aiming for supreme power for themselves (111, 113). Nicolaus does, however, show respect for M. Brutus, noting the high esteem in which he was held (*BK* 59, 100; Toher 273). He also allowed Brutus to state his case at length in a direct-discourse speech purporting to have been delivered in the Forum on the day of the assassination, when our other sources merely report the delivery of a speech (a point passed over lightly by Toher 41, 360). Sadly, the speech (the only one of its kind of which we have any trace in what survives of the *BK*) is lost except for the excerptor's cross-reference (at *BK* 100) to the Constantinian volume *On Public Speeches* (*Περὶ δημηγοριῶν*), where excerpts from the speech will have been included.

Like most of his fellow subjects, Nicolaus viewed Augustus as the beneficent ruler of the world, and was untroubled by any republican scruples. He consistently presents him as the legal heir to Caesar's supreme power, as seeking to attain this inheritance from the time of his return to Italy after the assassination, and as eventually achieving it through his victory in the civil wars (*BK* 53–8, 113, 120; well discussed by Toher 54, 255, 391–2). This is one of the respects in which his account must have diverged sharply from Augustus' autobiography. It is true that, when he arrived in Rome at the head of his veteran recruits in November 44, Octavian shocked Cicero (*Att.* 16.15.3) by swearing at a *contio* that he would win his father's honours. However, in the autobiography, published at least in its final form some years after the settlement of 28–27 by which he claimed to have restored the *res publica* to the *arbitrium* of the senate and people (*RG* 34.1), Augustus must surely have portrayed himself as actuated throughout his career not by a title to supremacy, but by concern for the *res publica*.

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The fragments of Nicolaus' autobiography, which have not previously been available in English translation, are a welcome inclusion in this volume.¹¹ However, it is regrettable that, by contrast with his ample treatment of the *BK*, Toher provides only minimalist coverage of this important text, supplying only a very short commentary and brief discussion in his introduction (20–1).

Toher reasserts here (1–28) the strong views on the chronology of Nicolaus' career and literary production which he developed in earlier publications. The solutions he adopts may well be correct, but at some points he appears too ready to dismiss alternative possibilities.

Our only firm evidence on Nicolaus' career is supplied by his own

¹¹ Another desirable inclusion would have been the testimonia for Nicolaus, some of them from obscure and late authors, for which Toher merely cites Jacoby's edition.

statements in the autobiography and information from Josephus and Strabo. Later sources add details of questionable reliability. Nicolaus was born around 64 BCE (*IB* 6.8 = F 136 Jac.). In 20, he was an eyewitness to Augustus' reception of Indian ambassadors near Antioch (Str. 15.1.73). For the period 14–4 BCE, we hear a good deal of his activity as a prominent member of Herod's court, and in this capacity he travelled to Rome at least three times, interceding with Augustus on behalf of Herod in 8 and of his successor Archelaus in 4. After 4 BCE, we hear no more.

Toher (3–6) argues plausibly that Nicolaus' relationship with Herod may have originated in a family friendship formed at Damascus in the 40s, and that his tutorship of the children of Antony and Cleopatra, attested by the late writer Sophronius, must, if historical, have taken place at Alexandria in the 30s rather than during their later residence at Rome in the care of Augustus' sister, Octavia. More questionable is Toher's view (18–21) that from 4 BCE on, Nicolaus remained at Rome, composing his biographical and philosophical works, enjoying the friendship of Augustus and eventually outliving him. Later writers' evidence for Nicolaus' friendship with Augustus (who is said to have named a variety of date after him) is of doubtful value, and, although Nicolaus' claim (*IB* 8 = F 138 Jac.) that he avoided the houses of the great and rich at Rome, preferring to spend his time on philosophy, may relate to a period of residence there rather than to his visits as Herod's courtier, it remains possible that he died not long after 4 BCE.

The only firm indication of the date of composition of the *BK* is Nicolaus' description of Augustus as 'having pacified as many as live within the River Rhine' (1: ἡμερωσάμενος ὅποσοι ἐντὸς Ῥήνου ποταμοῦ κατοικοῦσιν), a formulation which he will hardly have employed in the period from 8 BCE to 9 CE, when Germany up to the Elbe was deemed to be under Roman rule. Jacoby's influential dating of the work to the 20s BCE was based solely on his erroneous conception of its relationship to Augustus' autobiography, and the proem's evocation of Augustus' beneficence as sole ruler and the universal honour in which he was held hardly fits so early a date. Toher (22–8) believes that the work was composed after Augustus' death, and so in Nicolaus' old age. This dating gains some support from the past tenses in the opening paragraph and from the later reference to Augustus as showing modesty (*αἰδώς*) 'throughout his whole life' (*BK* 29). However, these indications are not conclusive, and the dating to c. 12 BCE (perhaps in association with Nicolaus' visit to Rome in Herod's company), proposed by some nineteenth-century scholars (references at Toher 23 n. 54), remains an attractive alternative. Drusus' and Tiberius' conquest of the Alps would then justify the reference to pacification up to the Rhine, and Nicolaus' opening effusion on Augustus' achievements as sole ruler

is not unlike the celebratory language deployed around that time in, for example, the later poems of Horace or the calendar decree of the province of Asia.¹²

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¹² Ehrenberg and Jones (1976) no. 98.