

BOOK REVIEW

The Political Biographies of Cornelius Nepos. By Rex Stem. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. Pp. x + 291. \$70.00. ISBN 978-0-4721-1838-0.

While perhaps not everyone would go as far as Nicholas Horsfall in styling Cornelius Nepos “an intellectual pygmy” (*Cambridge History of Classical Literature* Vol. II (1982) 290), he generally has not commanded respect. Rex Stem seeks to redeem Nepos in general and in particular contends that he “created the genre of serial political biography so that he might depict the renowned generals of Mediterranean history as exemplary figures for his contemporary Roman audience” (vii). The breadth of this study ensures that a wide range of readers will find it helpful.

The first chapter covers a vast array of material: Nepos through the lens of Catullus 1, the extant corpus (including questions of second editions, to which Stem answers yes for the *Atticus*, no for *On Foreign Generals*), the secondary literature on Nepos, the importance of reading him as a biographer, and an extended analysis of Nepos’ translation and adaptation of Thucydides for the *Themistocles*. Chapter 2 concerns Nepos’ relationships with known contemporaries. Stem sees the *Atticus* as portraying Atticus as Nepos’ idealized version of himself, the relationship between Nepos and Cicero as more respectful than it has generally been considered, and the moralizing of the *Exempla* as sentiments shared with Catullus. Chapter 3 deals with the work of three scholars relevant to Stem’s interpretation: Joseph Geiger (with whom Stem generally agrees, although he does not accept Geiger’s narrow definition of what constitutes political biography), Fergus Millar, and Carlotta Dionisotti. Stem argues that the latter two support his view of Nepos as a source for political commentary. Chapter 4 is Stem’s exposition of his theoretical approach. The general realm is exemplarity, and Stem shows how it works both overtly and more subtly. Within exemplarity, he sees Nepos casting his foreign material to make it relevant to a Roman triumviral audience and espousing cultural (but not moral) relativism. Chapter 5 looks at the *Epaminondas*, *Pelopidas*, and *Agesilaus* to show how Nepos’ exemplarizing functions. The combination of these three lives allows for a close, sustained discussion of both one period in Greek history and questions central to triumviral Rome. In the brief

Conclusion, Stem presents Nepos not as a second-rate mind suitable for school-boys but as a sturdy advocate of republican virtue addressing his peers, and he suggests that Caesar may lurk behind Nepos' depiction of Epaminondas, Pelopidas, and Agesilaus.

There is so much in this book that this review can treat just a few of the features worth noting. Stem has a gift for the big picture and provides lots of context, from situating Nepos amongst his contemporaries to biography's generic relationship to history. This aspect will make the book invaluable for readers new to Nepos or looking for a way into the world of triumviral Rome. Even footnotes can be handy troves of information. For example, at pp. 30–1, n. 87 Stem succinctly summarizes the publication history of the standard commentary, Nipperdey and Witte (1913), and at p. 134, n. 19 consolidates information about Nepos' programmatic passages.

Readers interested in exemplarity will find much to ponder in Stem's discussion. In his words, "Actions become *exempla* when an author frames them as such within a set of exemplary templates" (146). In keeping with the fixity implied by this terminology, he sees Nepos as controlling his *exempla*'s meaning, and indeed he persuasively illustrates how Nepos' selection of details shapes his subjects (such as the omission of Tegyra from the *Pelopidas* (191 n. 45), or the telescoping of time in the *Agesilaus* (218)). At the same time, when analyzing individual lives, Stem approaches what Rebecca Langlands has called the "situational variability" of *exempla* (*JRS* 101 (2011) 100–22), and his interpretations include considerable flexibility. This reader would be inclined to go even further in that direction.

Stem's reading of the two Boeotians and Agesilaus was fascinating and thought-provoking. The three lives emerge as intertwined, especially those of Epaminondas and Pelopidas. For while the latter was Thebes' greatest leader and brought his polis to pre-eminence, Pelopidas deserves sole credit for the liberation of Thebes, which in turn made possible its ascendancy under Epaminondas. Agesilaus, by contrast, is not their antagonist, but a foil for Epaminondas. For Nepos, both leaders can be exemplary even though in life they were enemies. As Stem puts it, "Virtue is to be praised wherever it occurs. It need not be limited to one side of a conflict" (227). The careers of all three men appear to have triumviral subtexts: Epaminondas exceeded the term of his command to save his army, thereby obeying the law's spirit (the good of Thebes) but not its letter (surrendering his office on schedule); Pelopidas was willing to kill fellow citizens for the

libertas of the city; Agesilaus' chief virtue was his loyalty to Sparta, whatever its trajectory.

Stem's discussion of the three *Lives* was so engaging that one might wish he had sacrificed some context for content: many *Lives* go virtually unexamined. Nonetheless, the book certainly achieves his goal of rehabilitating Nepos, as well as opening up rich lines for further investigation.

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