The Date of Nicolaus’ Βίος Καίσαρος

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Lively discussion has already been generated by the recent publication of new inscriptions from Aphrodisias;¹ one commentator has pointed out that it will be some time before consensus is reached on the date and context of many of these.² The presentation of new material often provokes reconsideration of old and neglected issues; one such is the date of the biography of Augustus by Nicolaus of Damascus. A significantly later terminus post quem for the composition of this work is indicated, if the proposed date for a letter of Octavian preserved at Aphrodisias is correct. A re-examination of the evidence shows that a number of assumptions that have been made about the relationship of the Bios to the lost autobiography of Augustus are implausible, and that a much later date of composition is indeed likely.

For the past sixty years there has been general acceptance of F. Jacoby’s persuasive and attractive thesis that the Bios Kaisaros of Nicolaus was written in the late 20’s B.C., and followed in form and content the recently-completed Latin autobiography of Augustus.³ The crux of Jacoby’s argument was his contention that references to

² Badian, GRBS (supra n.1) 157.
³ The fragments are FGrHist 90FF125–30. Previous to Jacoby a much later date of composition had been generally maintained. C. Müller, FHG III (1849) 434 n.1, proposed a date of ca 12 B.C. based on the use of ἐνταυθοῖ in F130.37, a statement that seemed to imply that Nicolaus had been composing the Bios at Apollonia while on his first trip to Rome. Müller was followed in his dating by O. Schmidt, Die letzten Kämpfe der römischen Republik (Jahr.,f.class.Phil. Suppl. 13 [Leipzig 1884]) 684f; A. von Gutschmid, Kleine Schriften V (Leipzig 1894) 549; and, more recently, G. W. Bowersock, Augustus and the Greek World (Oxford 1965) 135. For a convincing refutation of the arguments for this date cf. Jacoby ad loc. 125–30 (p.263). Others have supposed that the Bios was written after the death of Augustus: J. Asbach, RhM 37 (1882) 297, R. Laqueur, RE 17.1 (1936) 406 s.v. “Nikolaos (20) von Damaskos,” and W. Steidle, Sueton und die antike Biographie (Munich 1951) 134. Cf. n.5 infra.
military conquests in the panegyric prooemium of the *Bios* could only
refer to campaigns conducted by Octavian personally; consequently,
the campaigns against the Pannonians and Illyrians were those of
Octavian in 35 B.C., and mention of the pacification of peoples up to
the Rhine referred to Octavian’s campaign in Gaul in 34. In so
arguing, Jacoby avoided the earlier conclusion that the reference
ἐντὸς Ἡνίου must indicate a time around or before 12 B.C. or after
A.D. 10, the two dates during the Principate when Roman troops
were not consistently beyond the Rhine. Jacoby then proposed 27
B.C. and the assumption of the title *Augustus* as a suitable terminal
date for the *Bios*. He believed that Nicolaus wrote his work in the
late twenties B.C., when the autobiography of Augustus was in cir-
culation, and before he began work on his long universal history. On
the basis of this reconstruction Jacoby was able to maintain (p.264)
that the *Bios* closely reflected the recently completed autobiography
of Augustus, and may, in fact, have been a Greek paraphrase of that
document for the Eastern peoples of the Empire.

As a consequence of Jacoby’s thesis, it seemed possible to recog-
nize, at least in part, the immense debt of Nicolaus’ *Bios* to the lost
autobiography of Augustus. Jacoby himself thought he could identify
passages that must have come from the autobiography. H. Malco-
vati, in her introduction to the fragments of Augustus’ writings,
states that part of Augustus’ autobiography included anecdotes from
his ‘Jugendgeschichte’. Since there is no evidence of such material
in the extant remains of the autobiography, Malcovati can only have
reached her conclusion by deduction from such anecdotes as are
found in the *Bios*. E. Gabba, in a recent essay on Augustus and the
historians, asserts that it is now generally agreed that the *Bios*
was

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4 Cf. F125.1: ὃν δὲ πρῶτον οὐδὲ ὠνόματα ἡπίσταντο οἱ ἀνθρωποι οὐδὲ τῶν
ἄτικνων ἠγένετο διὰ μητῆς, ἡμεροσάμενος ὅποιον ἐντὸς Ἡνίου ποταμῶν κατοι-
κώσαν ὑπὲρ τῶν Ἐλληνων πόλεων καὶ τὰ Ἑλληνικὰ γένη. Jacoby ad loc. (p.263): “von
eigenen waffentaten des kaisers, nicht von denen seiner legaten, muss nach dem gan-
ze gehalt der stelle die rede gewesen sein.”

5 Since the publication of Jacoby’s commentary, Laqueur (supra n.3) argued for
a date after the death of Augustus on the basis of the aorist tense of some of the verbs
in the prooemium; Steidle (supra n.3) believed that the text reflected a period of
peace, and for this reason was post-Augustan. The effectiveness of these
arguments can be measured by the lack of recognition they have received. Laqueur especially
vitiates his arguments for the date and structure of the *Bios* by asserting (422f) that we
have the *Bios* essentially as Nicolaus wrote it. This is in obvious contradiction to state-
ments in the document itself that clearly indicate that events and affairs were narrated
that are not in the extant text; cf. F126.2 and F130.58.

6 Cf. his comments on F126.3, F127.5f, F128.31, F130.37–46, 55, 68, 95–97, 110–
14, 124, 136.

written between 25 and 20 B.C. and was a “free paraphrase” of Augustus’ autobiography. It is clear then that the issue of the date of composition of the *Bios* has significance beyond simply establishing the chronological order of the corpus of a secondary author.

The newly-published Aphrodisias documents, in connection with other evidence, now allow a secure *terminus post quem* to be established from the text itself. In F130.45 Nicolaus states that Augustus gave *eleutheria* and *ateleia* to Illyrian Apollonia for the devotion it had shown him during his stay there just before the assassination of Caesar: 

\[\text{Ἀπολλωνιάτας δὲ τότε <τε> ἐπήνεσε καὶ παρελθὼν εἰς τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐλευθερίαν τε αὕτους καὶ ἀτέλειαν ... ἐπίδοσι.}\]

Document 13 of the Aphrodisias inscriptions, a letter of Octavian rejecting a request by the Samians for such privileges, gives important evidence concerning the date of the grant to Apollonia:

\[\text{Αὐτοκράτωρ Καίσαρ θεοῦ Ἰουλίου νυὸς Ἀὔγουστος Σαμίων ύπὸ τὸ ἄξιον μετέγραψεν:}\]

\[\text{ἐξετιν ὑμεῖν αὕτου ὀραν ὅτι τὸ φιλάνθρωπον τῆς ἐλευθερίας οὐδενὶ δέδωκα δήμῳ πλὴν τῶν Ἀφροδεισιῶν ὃς ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ τὰ ἔμα φρονήσας δοράλωτος διὰ τὴν πρὸς ἡμᾶς εὐνοιαν ἐγένετο:}\]

\[\text{οὐ γὰρ ἐστιν δίκαιον τὸ πάντων μέγιστον φιλάνθρωπον εἰπὴ καὶ χωρίς αἰτίας χαρίζεσθαι. ἐγὼ δὲ ὑμεῖν μὲν εὐνοῶ καὶ βουλοίμην ἄν τῇ γυναικὶ μου ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν σπουδαζοῦσῃ χαρίζεσθαι ἀλλὰ ὑμῖν ὅστε καταλῦσαι τὴν συνήθειαν μουν: οὐδὲ γὰρ τῶν χρημάτων μοι μέλει α εἰς τὸν φόρον τελεῖτε ἀλλὰ τὰ τεμιώτατα φιλάνθρωπα χωρίς αἰτίας εὐλόγου δεδωκένα οὐ- δὲν βούλομαι.}\]

The Aphrodisians, in all probability, inscribed this copy of the letter out of pride in the statement (2f) that they were the first city to be granted *eleutheria* by Augustus.

The date of this letter constitutes a *terminus post quem* for the grant to Apollonia and the composition of the *Bios*. Unfortunately, the actual date is a matter of speculation. Reynolds’ rejection of the title *Αὔγουστος* as significant for dating the document is convincing, but her own date in the triumviral period (ca 38 B.C., on the occasion of

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the marriage of Octavian and Livia) has been properly questioned by two commentators, who argue that the use of the phrase τὰ ἐμὰ φρονήσας would be "remarkable" in so early a document, and that the phrase ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ need not refer to the war with Labienus.9 Badian has presented a strong case for a date in 31 B.C., when we know Octavian was busy settling the East.10 Bowersock has offered a later and—for consideration of the Βίος—more intriguing date.

We know, as Bowersock points out, that the Samians finally did receive their eleutheria in the winter of 20/19 while Augustus was travelling in the East with Livia (Dio 54.9.7). More significantly, it is likely that Livia interceded with Augustus on behalf of certain Greek cities on this same trip (Dio 54.7.2). Moreover, it was only on the return leg of this journey from the East that Augustus actually did honor the request of Samos, and it is obvious from the context of Dio 54.9.7 that this was a decision made on short notice and without much deliberation. Bowersock proposes, then, that at some time during Augustus' stay in Samos, while on his outward journey, ca 22 B.C., the Princeps received a request from the Samians, supported by Livia, for eleutheria; document 13 is a copy of the letter denying this request. It was only later, on the return journey, most appropriately just before he would have left Samos in the spring of 19, that Augustus finally succumbed to the combined pleas of his wife and the Samians, and bestowed the grant.11

If Bowersock's dating of the inscription is correct, it is reasonable to believe that the grants of eleutheria and ateleia to Apollonia should be dated to some time after 19 B.C., for there is no reason to think that the Apolloniats would have been accorded their privileges in the period between Augustus' refusal and eventual grant of such privileges to Samos. Thus, on this reconstruction of events, the Βίος must also have been composed after 19 B.C.

Such a terminus post quem for the Βίος does not render Jacoby's theory about the nature and form of the Βίος impossible, but it does make it less probable, since Nicolaus would now be writing the Βίος at least three years after the autobiography was issued. Furthermore, other factors suggest that Jacoby's assertion of a close relationship of the Βίος and the autobiography of Augustus may not be altogether secure.

As stated above, the crux of Jacoby's dating of the Βίος to the late 20's was his contention that only military campaigns conducted by

9 Bowersock (supra n.1) 52, and Badian, GRBS (supra n.1) 166.
10 Badian, ibid. 166–69.
11 Bowersock (supra n.1) 52.
Augustus personally could be mentioned in the panegyric prooemium, for otherwise the reference to the subjugation of peoples \( \varkappa \varepsilon \tau \delta \varepsilon \, ' \Pi \eta \nu \omega \) would probably refer to the campaigns of Roman armies in the region between 20 and 12 B.C. There is, however, no evidence to maintain that there was such a tradition for the panegyric prooemium. It had been the practice from the earliest part of the Principate to claim the conquests and achievements of Augustan lieutenants as those of the Princeps himself. Numerous examples can be found in the poets, and Augustus himself (in the \textit{Res Gestae} and elsewhere) did not hesitate to lay claim to the victories of others. Apparently his readers readily accepted the Princeps' claim to exclusive credit for the victories of armies operating \textit{meo iussu et auspicio}. Indeed, early in the Principate it became policy that only Augustus and members of his family could be hailed as \textit{imperator}. There is, then, no good reason to maintain, as Jacoby does, that Nicolaus would have limited himself, in the preserved part of the prooemium, to mentioning only those conquests in which Augustus was personally involved, for quite the opposite practice had operated throughout the Principate. Consequently, the evidence of the prooemium does not date the text decisively to the early period of the Principate, and it is probable that other later campaigns were meant.

\footnote{12 Cf. supra n.4.}

\footnote{13 Cf. Laqueur (supra n.3) 405, who points out that it was possible to claim the region as far as the Rhine settled at any time after the campaigns of Julius Caesar; cf. Sall. \textit{Hist.} 1.11 M., \textit{res Romanas plurimum imperio valuit ... omni Gallia cis Rhenum ... perdomita}.}

\footnote{14 The poets not only credited to Augustus deeds that were not his personally, they also claimed for him the conquest of whole regions that were never attacked by Roman armies—e.g. the celebrations of the triple triumph of 29 B.C., in which the conquest of the Parthian kingdom was claimed: cf. Verg. \textit{G.} 3.30–34, Prop. 3.9.53–55, Hor. \textit{Carm.} 2.9.18–22. On Augustus taking credit for the victories of his generals cf. V. Ehrenberg and A. H. M. Jones, \textit{Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus and Tiberius} (Oxford 1955) no. 40, and \textit{Res Gestae} 26f. Panegyric writing encouraged such exaggeration. According to the \textit{Rhet.Alex.}, the prologue of a panegyric should include a statement of the wonderful and outstanding achievements of the subject (1440b10), as well as attribution to him of qualities not in fact his (1425b13f).}


\footnote{16 B. Scardigli, \textit{Sililat} 50 (1978) 245–52, has attempted to support Jacoby's date by reference to Dio 50.24.4, but this passage looks suspiciously like another portion of a speech by Augustus in Dio (53.7.1). Most likely these descriptions of the accomplishments of Augustus are nothing more than tropes developed by Dio based on Augustan propaganda. They can indicate nothing of significance about the chronology of Augustan conquests or even their historicity. On the authenticity of the speeches in Dio, cf. P. Brunt, \textit{JRS} 53 (1963) 172; on the speech from which Scardigli takes this passage, cf. Malcovati (supra n.7) xxxix.}
Three other problems arise from consideration of Jacoby’s theory. First, to judge from the remains of Nicolaus’ autobiography, there is no evidence that Nicolaus met Augustus before 20 B.C., and it seems that it was only after the death of his patron Herod in 4 B.C. that Nicolaus resided in Rome for any continuous period. It must have been in the years after 4 B.C. that a friendship developed between Nicolaus and Augustus, a friendship that eventually led Augustus to name a variety of date palm after his biographer.\(^\text{17}\) It is difficult to understand what would have induced Nicolaus to compose an encomiastic biography of Augustus before 4 B.C., when we can safely assume he would have been hard at work on his massive universal history, written for the edification of Herod (\(F\ 135\)). Circumstances after this date, however, do present a suitable context.

Second, Jacoby dismissed, without substantive argument, the implications of an observation made by F. Leo concerning the section of the \(Bios\) (\(F\ 130.58-107\)) that deals with the conspiracy and murder of Julius Caesar. This section, which constitutes over a third of the extant \(Bios\), is, in fact, a long digression; it concentrates on the person of Caesar and completely excludes Octavian. Leo resolved the question by suggesting that the digression on Caesar was taken by Nicolaus from his universal history and inserted in the \(Bios\).\(^\text{18}\) This proposition has serious implications for the dating of the \(Bios\) because we can be reasonably certain that the history was not published much before 12 B.C., and most scholars believe that Nicolaus was still engaged in writing it as late as 4 B.C.\(^\text{19}\) Despite Jacoby’s curt dismissal (p.264), there is merit in Leo’s suggestion. The bridging passage that introduces the discussion of Caesar’s assassination into the \(Bios\) is awkward and indicates that the author was aware that the following sections would be anomalous in this context.\(^\text{20}\) Their tone and style are very different from those found in the

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\(^{17}\) The first opportunity for Nicolaus to meet Augustus came in 20 B.C. at Antioch (\(F\ 100\), with Jacoby’s comments, p.229), although there is no evidence that such a meeting actually took place. For his residence in Rome after the death of Herod cf. \(F\ 138\). On the naming of the date palm cf. \(T\ 10\).

\(^{18}\) F. Leo, \textit{Die griechisch-römische Biographie nach ihrer litterarischen Form} (Leipzig 1901) 191.

\(^{19}\) \(F\ 135\) implies that Nicolaus had finished the history before his first trip to Rome in 12 B.C., but most scholars believe that \(F\ 102\), which mentions the conspiracy of the sons of Mariamme against Herod in 7 B.C., indicates that Nicolaus was occupied with it continuously down to 4 B.C., ending with the death of Herod; cf. Jacoby p.231 and W. Otto, \textit{RE} Suppl. 2 (1903) 3 and 129 s.v. “Herodes (14).”

\(^{20}\) ἐξήγησε δὲ τούτον εὐθὺς ὁ λόγος ὡς συντότητα τήν ἐπιμολήν οἱ σφαγεῖς ἐπὶ Καίσαρα καί ὡς τό σύμμαν κατεργάσαντο, τά τε μετά ταύτα πραξάντα, κυνηγήσαν τῶν ὀλίων, διεξαμεν ὡς αὐτὴν τε πρῶτον καθότι ἐγένετο καί ὅπως, τάς τε αἰτίας ὡς ὃν
rest of the *Bios*, but accord well with the dramatic and pathetic manner we find in a number of fragments from the history. In the digression, τύχη and μούδρα are the presiding factors (f130.83), and there is concentration on the vicissitudes of fortune that can accompany the career of a great man (f130.95). The two longest fragments of the universal history (f66 and f68) each demonstrate Nicolaus’ propensity to inject pathos and drama into his writing. This is especially clear in the account of the pyre of Croesus: although based essentially on Herodotus, the story is greatly embellished by Nicolaus.21 There must have been some description of Caesar’s assassination in the *Bios*, for it was a significant crisis in Octavian’s career and legitimated his entrance into public life at Rome.22 It is probable that Nicolaus, when faced with the necessity of retelling this episode in the *Bios*, depended on his previous account.

Finally, scholars have failed to note just what an historiographical anomaly the *Bios* becomes in Jacoby’s analysis. There is no secure precedent in classical antiquity for the publication of a partial biography during the lifetime of its subject.23 Moreover, all evidence

21 Although the accounts in Herodotus (1.86) and in Nicolaus (f68) are essentially the same in outline, they differ greatly in their presentation and emphasis: Herodotus’ version illustrates the retribution of the gods for the good fortune that Croesus claimed with such hubris; Nicolaus presents a scene full of pathos by inventing a dialogue between Croesus and his formerly mute son, and by giving an expanded and graphic depiction of the crowd of spectators and the rainstorm that receive only cursory mention in Herodotus. In this way, he turns an old tradition into a drama for his reader. See also H. W. Parke, “Croesus and Delphi,” *GRBS* 25 (1984) 226f.

22 Jacoby p.272 and Blumenthal (*supra* n.8) 124f.

23 Leo (*supra* n.18) 195–98 devised an elaborate theory based on a statement in Nepos’ life of Atticus (*hactenus Attico vivo edita a nobis sunt*, 19.1) that there were two ‘editions’ of Nepos’ *Lives*, each containing a life of Atticus, one published during the lifetime of Atticus and a second edition published after his death. This theory has been accepted by every standard work that deals with the matter; full analysis must await another context, but the crucial clause need not require that Nepos had issued a version accepted by every standard work that deals with the matter; full analysis must await another context, but the crucial clause need not require that Nepos had issued a version accepted by every standard work that deals with the matter; full analysis must await another context, but the crucial clause need not require that Nepos had issued a version accepted by every standard work that deals with the matter; full analysis must await another context, but the crucial clause need not require that Nepos had issued a version accepted by every standard work that deals with the matter; full analysis must await another context, but the crucial clause need not require that Nepos had issued a version accepted by every standard work that deals with the matter; full analysis must await another context, but the crucial clause need not require that Nepos had issued a version accepted by every standard work that deals with the matter; full analysis must await another context, but the crucial clause need not require that Nepos had issued a version accepted by every standard work that deals with the matter; full analysis must await another context, but the crucial clause need not require that Nepos had issued a version accepted by every standard work that deals with the matter; full analysis must await another context, but the crucial clause need not require that Nepos had issued a version accepted by every standard work that deals with the matter; full analysis must await another context, but the crucial clause need not require that Nepos had issued a version accepted by every standard work that deals with the matter; full analysis must await another context, but the crucial clause need not require that Nepos had issued a version accepted by ever
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indicates that Nicolaus was a devout Peripatetic, and any working hypothesis must suppose that he wrote in the Peripatetic biographical tradition. This supposition is confirmed by Nicolaus' emphasis on the deeds, τὰ πεπραγμένα, of Augustus (cf. Ρ126.2 and Ρ130.58)—a clear echo of the Peripatetic concern with illustrating the character of a man, his ζῆος, through analysis of his deeds, or πράξεις.

Because so little of the autobiography of Augustus is preserved, it is not a significant argument to note that there is no correspondence between any of the fragments of the Βιος and Augustus’ work. At the same time, such a paucity of evidence prohibits the assumption that the Βιος substantially reflects any part of the autobiography. It is clear that we can never know what, if any, relationship there was between the Βιος and Augustus’ autobiography; we can only deduce probabilities. But evidence from the Aphrodisias inscription, from the text of the Βιος itself, and the canons of Greek biographical writing all seem to indicate a date of composition and publication somewhat later than that supposed by Jacoby, probably a date after the death of Augustus. The burden of proof to the contrary must lie with those who believe there was a close correspondence between the two books.

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be found in H. Rahn, Hermes 85 (1957) 205–15. Even if one accepts the idea that Nepos was unique in publishing a biography during the lifetime of his subject, it remains that it was the overwhelming practice in the ancient world not to issue a biography until after the death of the subject.

24 In Ρ132 he refers to himself as a ζηλωτής Ἀριστοτέλος; for other evidence of Nicolaus’ reputation as Peripatetic cf. Ρ11 and Ρ73, 77, 78, 94, 95. For an analysis and translation of the fragments of Nicolaus’ work on the philosophy of Aristotle, cf. H. J. Drossart Lulofs, Nicolaus Damescenus on the Philosophy of Aristotle (Leiden 1965).

25 Leo (supra n.18) 190ff; cf. also A. Momigliano, The Development of Greek Biography (Harvard 1971) 86, and Second Thoughts on Greek Biography (Amsterdam/London 1971) 13.

26 Cf. Leo (supra n.18) 188–90 for a full discussion of Aristotle’s ethical theories as they relate to biography.