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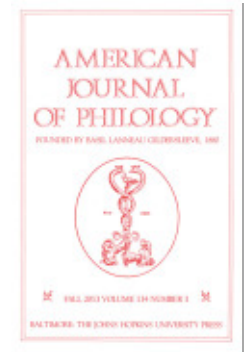
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## The Art of Biography in Antiquity by Tomas Hägg (review)

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Seneca depicts the cow as lacking the cognitive faculty to record a past event, a faculty which, according to the Stoics, was possessed only by humans and which made them superior to all other living beings. Seneca is certainly not advocating that Marcia relinquish this cognitive capacity. Thus the image of the cow also offers a negative model. Tutrone makes a salient comparison between this passage and Lucretius' depiction of the cow searching for her calf lost to sacrifice, a comparison which he asserts that Seneca deliberately prompts his reader to make. Lucretius describes the cow's behavior in terms appropriate for human lamentation, including the use of the word *querella*. He thus encourages his reader to consider that the cow possesses cognitive skills and that a parity exists between humans and animals. Seneca, on the other hand, uses the term "mute animal" and describes the cow as mooing (*mugitus*). In contrast to Lucretius, Seneca is thus an advocate for Stoic anthropocentrism and hierarchy.

This book, which includes an extensive bibliography, is a welcome addition to scholarship on the development in western society of human attitudes toward animals. Readers may not be persuaded by all of Tutrone's interpretations, but he does an effective job of stimulating thought about the contributions of Lucretius and Seneca to the (still ongoing) debates about the moral status of other animals.

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TOMAS HÄGG. *The Art of Biography in Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xv + 496 pp. Cloth, \$110.

We know less about the genre of ancient biography than handbooks and brief surveys would have us believe. Genres by their nature invite definition, and historiographical perspectives on this genre in particular promote tidy classifications and clear lines of influence. Tomas Hägg's *Art of Biography in Antiquity*, which undertakes close readings of some eight-hundred years' worth of biographical authors and texts, not only recognizes but also embraces ancient life-writing as a vast, polymorphous, versatile, and lacunary enterprise. For those of us who, like this reviewer, prefer to read the works of ancient biographers in literary terms, this is the book we have been wanting.

Hägg's "Prolegomena" are brief but cover the critical issues surrounding ancient biography (and, by way of comparison or contrast, modern biography). Chief among these are the question of the biographical genre itself, which Hägg acknowledges "is more subject matter than form" (3), and the welcome recuperation of biography as the product of "creative imagination" from its traditional status as a "sub-branch of historiography" (3). Hägg distinguishes historiography from historicity—namely, the biographer's evaluation of, and approaches to, his sources—and he enumerates what might be considered biographical biases, from

the emphasis on public rather than private life, to transference between author and subject, to the inventive bridging of gaps, to the tension between cradle-to-grave chronology and characterization in the moment. Brevity courts controversy, and Hägg cautions that “no systematic treatment of biographic theory and practice is intended” (1). Yet his prolegomena lay out clear guideposts for the case studies of later chapters, which make a more or less chronological exploration of the genre.

Chapter 1, even as it postulates Xenophon as the most important (or, at least, the most prolific) proto-biographer, discusses a range of fifth- and fourth-century B.C.E. texts and the ways in which they are—and, just as often, are not—biographies: Ion of Chios, *Epidemiai*; Plato, *Apology* and *Phaedo*; Xenophon, *Memorabilia*; Isocrates, *Evagoras*; Xenophon, again, *Agésilas* and *Cyropaedia*. It is no small task to trace the development of a genre given a vexed chronology, the differing purposes of these texts, and uncertainty as to how much influence their authors exerted upon one another. The *Epidemiai* offers a sympotic anecdote about Sophocles (preserved in Ath. 13.603e–4d) that illuminates the tragedian’s character. The *Apology* and the *Phaedo* together display and interpret the life of Socrates as “an ethical unity” (19), the former a retrospective defense of the philosopher’s career, the latter ending with a scenic description of his death. The *Memorabilia*, in turn, paints a “consistent, pregnant picture” (27) of Socrates’ persona with its serial anecdotes. The *Evagoras* confirms its own status as written encomium (*graphein*) and introduces what would become standard *topoi*, such as its subject’s genealogy, childhood, and methods of ruling. Likewise, the *Agésilas*, which emphasizes writing to an even greater degree and dichotomizes the Spartan king’s deeds and their underlying virtues. The *Cyropaedia*, therefore, is a pinnacle of proto-biography, extending from Cyrus’ childhood to his fictional, idealized death. Although Hägg reads each work on its own terms, and avoids an overly simplistic taxonomy, his emphasis on the unbiographical qualities of his case studies is at times counterproductive. Furthermore, he tends to conclude his discussions with considerations of “the biographical,” as if the preceding analyses—frequently engaged with the aforementioned *topoi*—have had little bearing. This said, chapter 1 describes a genre developing along lines that later biographers, and their readers, would have recognized.

Chapter 2, a survey of Hellenistic biographers, is on firmer (albeit more fragmentary) ground, perhaps because the texts of this era regularly have *bios* in their titles and therefore help to establish “an unmistakably biographical form” (67). Hägg considers examples from the three traditional sub-categories of Hellenistic “professional biography” (97), namely, the philosophic, the literary, and the political: Aristoxenus’ *Pythagoras* and *Socrates*; Satyrus’ *Life of Euripides*; a fragment of Hermippus involving an imbroglio between Alexander and the historian Callisthenes; and remains from Antigonos’ portraits of the philosophers Menedemus and Lycon. Hägg frames his discussion with, at the outset, some healthy skepticism toward Friedrich Leo’s hard divide between Peripatetic and Alexandrian biography and the respective *telos* of each in Plutarch and Suetonius; and with, at the close, consideration of Polybius, *Hist.* 10.21.4–8, where that

author contrasts the current narrative about Philopoemen of Megalopolis with his standalone biography of the same man. On the one hand, Hägg advocates against well-defined Hellenistic subgenres in favor of a genre with “a core but no sharp outlines” (68). On the other hand, Polybius’ quantitative and qualitative differentiation of biography from historiography—biography emphasizes upbringing and youth, offers more praise than blame, and amplifies select achievements—invests Hellenistic biographers with awareness of their own theory and praxis. Extrapolating from Aristotelian treatises or the programmatic statements of much later biographers becomes less necessary. The fragments in chapter 2, with support from closer contemporary evidence, suggest a genre that has come into its own.

Equally suggestive are the picaresque lives of popular heroes—Aesop, Alexander, and Homer—discussed in chapter 3. Unlike the biographies by Aristoxenus and the rest, “which are the works of distinctive authors and largely remain under authorial control” (99), these are (in David Konstan’s term) “open texts” in origin and transmission. As such, their range of material, subject to changing standards of inclusion, augmentation, and deletion, reflects centuries of telling and retelling, even as kernels of Hellenistic philosophic, political, and literary biography are in evidence. Each life (or, sometimes, “romance”) valorizes its subject not only by recounting episodes sometimes too fantastic or bizarre for other biographical forms but also by introducing otherwise unknown, and therefore fabricated, stories, poems, and other literary works. The biographies of Aesop and Homer, although they respond to and reify the canons of these authors, are not pure anthologies: Aesop tells many unattested fables, while Homer extemporizes new epigrams. Alexander, meanwhile, writes long letters, “reproduced” in the text, to Olympias and Aristotle. For Hägg, such fabrications are examples of what Konstan called the “almost promiscuous inclusiveness” (100) of open biography. In addition to creating the illusion of life for their quasi-fictional heroes, the invented fables, epigrams, and letters bolster the authority of the anonymous biographers, whose knowledge of their subjects now extends well beyond historical works and deeds.

The popular lives of chapter 3 pave the way for the lives of Jesus considered in chapter 4, with their episodic structures and their inclusion of parables and other sayings. Hägg begins his survey of the gospels—which includes not only the canonical four but also *Sayings Gospel Q*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, and several birth/infancy gospels—with the scholarly debate over whether or not they belong to the biographical genre: the work of Albrecht Dihle, Richard Burridge, and Dirk Frickenschmidt naturally receives attention. As one might expect, Hägg is less concerned with strict generic classification than with interpretation, and his objective, “to trace the gradual ‘biographizing’ of the Christian message” (155), is literary rather than theological. The disjointed collocation of teachings in Q and Thomas become embodied in Mark’s chronological narrative of Jesus’ words and deeds. Matthew and Luke, in turn, add material on Jesus’ birth and childhood, although not so much that later, apocryphal evangelists had no room to add even more. Luke in particular, with his anecdote of the young savior teaching in the temple (2.43–51), perpetuates the standard biographical *topos* of “a child

demonstrating extraordinary gifts and a behaviour that anticipates his grown-up persona” (171). Hägg concludes with portraits of Jesus at age thirty in the four canonical gospels, demonstrating how the characterization of Christ (as far as it goes) serves the purpose of each evangelist. It is abundantly clear that the gospels succeed as biographies, if only because the mystery of the divine made flesh is most effectively told as a human story.

Chapter 5 introduces various kinds of Roman political biography, from Cornelius Nepos’ *Atticus*, to Tacitus’ *Agricola*, to Suetonius’ *Nero*; also, Nicolaus of Damascus’ fragmentary *Augustus*. Hägg is concerned both with positioning Roman life-writing as a successor, albeit a distant one, to Hellenistic biographical tradition (Nicolaus’ work is a missing link of sorts) and with elucidating its quintessential *Romanitas*. Toward the latter concern, the *laudatio funebris*, with its encomium for the dead and formal summary of public deeds, is an important antecedent: in particular, Suetonius’ *per species* arrangement seems a written elaboration of this oratorical practice. Also quintessentially Roman is the elevation of the subject’s *exitus* (death) from mere *topos* into its own sub-genre, a trajectory perhaps inspired by whole works devoted to the deaths of illustrious men, of which the early principate had no lack. The most encomiastic of Hägg’s case studies are those whose authors have close relationships with their subjects: Nepos and Atticus, Nicolaus and Augustus, Tacitus and Agricola. Their closeness sheds some light on the distance between Suetonius and his emperors, which provides opportunities for blame as well as praise. However scholarly his tone, Suetonius illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of *imperium*, a project not without its hazards even under a reasonably benevolent (or at least competent) *princeps*.

Chapter 6 is devoted to the author “synonymous with Greek biography” (239), if not ancient biography writ large: Plutarch. With over forty extant lives at his disposal, Hägg wisely focuses on a single pair, *Demosthenes* and *Cicero*, in an effort to clarify Plutarch’s methodology and intent. The biographer’s discursive style, his uneven use of sources, his usual *topoi*, and his somewhat tendentious epilogues (*synkriseis*) are well represented in these two lives, which are unified as much by *variatio* as by corresponding details and themes. Hägg also devotes space to the author’s metaliterary comments on his craft (e.g., *Alex.* 1.1–3, *Per.* 1.3–4, *Demetr.* 1.5–6), which are often taken out of context and pressed into service as a biographical manifesto. In context, however, such comments contradict one another as they serve the life at hand: so, for instance, the anti- and pro-history sentiments at *Alex.* 1.1 and *Aem.* 1.1, respectively. What emerges is a kind of faulty parallelism in conventional thinking about Plutarch. Here is not the master architect of a grand biographical oeuvre, but a scholar whose didactic program of ethical biography grew in the telling; a reader of Hellenistic and Roman lives, but beholden to no precedent; an advocate of the cradle-to-grave narrative, but no slave to formula or routine. As Hägg aptly summarizes, Plutarch displays “habits, but no rules” (281).

At nearly one-hundred pages, chapter 7 is almost a monograph in itself. Its length is justified by the popularity of philosophical lives in the imperial Roman

era, particularly those in the Pythagorean mold. No less than ten biographical texts are considered: Lucian's *Alexander*, *Peregrinus*, and *Demonax*; the anonymous *Life of Secundus* (handled in an unusually curt discussion); Diogenes Laertius' compendium of philosophers; Philostratus' *Apollonius of Tyana* and *Lives of the Sophists*; lives of Pythagoras by Porphyry and Iamblichus; and Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*. Hägg does a worthy job of balancing many antithetical concerns in this range of texts, from the serious versus the satirical, to narratives of individual lives versus collective ways of life, to the biographical versus the doxographical. Perhaps more than in any other chapter, the reader is struck by the seemingly endless variety of ancient life-writing even within a common philosophic-sophistic focus. Of the works surveyed here, the *Apollonius* displays the most points of contact with other biographical texts, including the *Cyropaedia*, the popular *Alexander*, and the gospels. Certainly it is one of the most full and satisfying biographies from antiquity, despite being read more for its ideology than its literary merits.

Rounding out the book are an epilogue on the confluence of secular and Christian biography, which continues the discussion begun in chapter 7, and thoughtful recommendations to specialists and non-specialists alike for further reading in both the primary and secondary sources. A full bibliography and general index follow.

Hägg surveys so many authors and texts that it is easy to lose sight of the forest for all of the trees. For example, although it makes passing references to the gospels, chapter 7 might have drawn deeper connections between philosophic lives and the lives of Jesus—if not in terms of influence, at least in terms of common aims, motifs, and themes. Nevertheless, Hägg productively roughs out the smooth edges of a genre whose modern name, *biographia*, first appears only in the sixth century C.E. The reader learns in the preface that Hägg grew ill and died not long after delivering the final version of his book to the press (xiii). This news, delivered so matter-of-factly, suffuses the work with irony. *The Art of Biography in Antiquity*, a study of the ancient *bios-vita*, literally marks the end of Tomas Hägg's own life. At the same time, the book's depth, breadth, and erudition will hopefully grant it, and its author, a long and deserved *Nachleben*.

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