from a wide range of *generic modes*, identification of which can prove very helpful. This does not alter the fact their actual *genre itself* has still to be clearly established.

With this understanding of genre as our background and framework, the next step in this study must be to establish a similarly clear understanding of classical literature and in particular the forms and genre of Graeco-Roman biography.

# 3

## GENRE CRITICISM AND GRAECO-ROMAN BIOGRAPHY

Much, perhaps too much, has been written on ancient biography as a literary genre with formal origins and fixed rules.[1]

In order to define the genre of Graeco-Roman biography, we must abandon the notion that an intricate, standard biographical form was developed and passed on through the centuries.[2]

Our study of literary theory has demonstrated that genre is a crucial tool for the study and interpretation of a text in that it provides a form of contract between author and reader, giving a set of expectations for both composition and interpretation. Now we turn to another discipline, that of classical literature, to provide us with the second area of expertise needed for our study. We shall begin with the use made of genre criticism among classicists to discover if similar ideas about genre may be found to be important here also. Then we will turn to the genre of Graeco-Roman biography itself to consider its genre and development. Only after all this has been done will we be in position to assess the relationship of the gospels with Graeco-Roman biography.

### A  Genre use and theory

### 1  Theory and practice

The innocent New Testament scholar who crosses over into study of classical literature may be tempted to read off concepts of ancient literary theory either from the various authors' prefaces to

[1] Opening words of B. Baldwin, 'Biography at Rome', in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History*, vol. 1, ed. Carl Deroux (Collection Latomus, vol. 164, Brussels, 1979), pp. 100–18; = chapter 2 of his *Suetonius* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1983), pp. 66–100.

[2] Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (University of California Press, 1983), p. 54.

their works or from the rules of the later grammarians and rhetoricians, such as Quintilian or Menander Rhetor. These concepts and rules can then be projected back on to the particular work in question and seen as determinative. Such an approach is adopted by Shuler.[3] However, all that we have discovered about genre as a flexible set of expectations rather than prescriptive rules raises theoretical questions about this. Further, some classicists themselves are sceptical about the use of prefaces and rhetoricians in this way.

There was much interest at the turn of this century in the study of genres, called εἴδη or γένη, with Latin literature studied as a further development from Greek.[4] This resulted in a source critical approach to ascertain how much the writer had imitated from previous authors and how much was original. R.K. Hack, however, argued strongly against such notions of the evolution of genres, using an analysis of Horace's *Ars Poetica* as an example of how this 'doctrine of literary forms' was misleading.[5] He identified and described two contrasting approaches over generations of critics to the *Ars Poetica*: to treat the work as an εἰσαγωγή, written according to a fixed rhetorical scheme, or as an *epistula* and therefore written in a loose conversational style. Both schools then judge the work on its success or failure according to how it fulfils the predetermined outline and rules of the proposed genre – and, in the case of failure, some going so far as to rearrange the work to suit the outline as it 'should' be. The basic error of both approaches to Horace, argued Hack, is to place the primary emphasis on the *form* of a work as determining its structure and content, even to the extent of the actual text being chopped about in a cavalier fashion to fit the supposed form.

To illuminate the problem, Hack turned his attention to ancient literary theory. As we have seen, the guiding principle of theorists such as Horace and Cicero was 'propriety', where everything such as content and metre must fit the Ideal Form, εἶδος or γένος.[6] However, Hack showed that Horace does not keep his own rules: only nine out of seventeen *Epodes* are truly satirical (as they

[3] Shuler, *A Genre for the Gospels*, pp. 36–56.
[4] E. Norden, *Einleitung in die Altertumswissenschaft* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1905), vol. 1, p. 324.
[5] R.K. Hack, 'The Doctrine of Literary Forms', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 27 (1916), pp. 1–65.
[6] Hack, 'Doctrine', pp. 15–27 on Horace, pp. 37–43 on Cicero and others; see pp. 27–8 above.

'should' be) whereas the other eight are lyric, indistinguishable from the *Odes*. The *Odes* themselves are a mixture of genres, or even new creations: 'Horace, the perfect artist, was a desperate mixer of genres.' Furthermore, the best of his poems are the very ones which break the rules: the validity of the laws 'is in inverse ratio to the originality and personal merit of the poems'. So a contradiction emerges where 'the laws of the lyric genre upheld by Horace the critic are definitely annulled by Horace the poet'.[7] The notion of poems conforming to some generic Ideal which is universally valid is Platonic in character, with similarities to the 'laws' of science. Literature, however, does not work like that. Instead of deciding the genre in advance, and then criticizing a work for how well or badly it fits the genre, the critic should recognize the role played by creative poetic genius which takes basic rules, but bends or breaks them in the attempt to produce literature.[8] Hack thus sounds a warning not to take the theoretical writings and prefaces of classical authors too strictly as a rigid guide to their work.

A similar conclusion is reached by L.E. Rossi.[9] Instead of determining a work's genre from external considerations, such as formal laws and theory, it must be discovered by internal examination of various features ('elementi') such as themes, structure, language, metre, music and dance.[10] Also important is the relationship of author to audience, the social contexts and historical situations which produced both the literature and the generic expectations affecting it. Thus Rossi sets out to produce not a history of genres themselves, but an account of the development of the 'laws' governing them. However, he does not have a fixed or rigid concept of genre. Such ideas might have been around in rhetorical works of late antiquity, but this was because they saw genre as a means of *classifying* literature. Rossi identifies three main periods, beginning with the *archaic period*, when the laws were not actually written down in a manual of literary theory, but were observed by artists passing them on one to another. In the *classical period* the laws start to be written down and codified; reflection upon them is passing from the poets themselves to theorists and philosophers, particularly Aristotle and his followers.

[7] Hack, 'Doctrine', pp. 27–32; quotations from pp. 30, 32 and 31.
[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 63–5.
[9] L.E. Rossi, 'I Generi Letterari e Le Loro Leggi Scritte e Non Scritte Nelle Letterature Classiche', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 18, University of London, (1971), pp. 69–94.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 71.

However, the laws are observed to a large degree. It is the third period, the time of the *Alexandrians*, where a divergence appears: the laws are increasingly codified and written down, with various classificatory works being produced. Yet at the same time, this period is one of great literary innovation. The very act of codifying generic laws gave scope for experimentation and change.[11] The period of the last centuries BC and the first century AD is a time of flexible genres. Latin writers continue this fluid mix of theory and practice. Generic laws are not rigid, but norms and practice are in creative tension, 'costante dialettica'.[12] The gospels are written, therefore, during this period of flexibility and innovation.

Thus we have a warning about slavish use of ancient theory in the analysis of genre. Prefaces and the like may be helpful, but they are no substitute for analysis of the text itself.

## 2  The mixing of genres

Next we need to consider how new genres are developed in a period of creative experimentation and innovation. Kroll used the concept of the 'crossings' of genres; throughout ancient literature, genres were being mixed and crossbred to achieve new results, particularly in the shift from the countryside to the towns. Genres tend to originate in real life in various settings, especially in the countryside. However, once literature became separated from this, together with the rise of towns and literary centres, the old boundaries between genres were weakened. Poets took old genres as a starting-point to produce new ones ('in die alten Gattungen und Stoffe neue Variationen zu bringen').[13] Thus in Theocritus, bucolic poetry, different metres and dialects, various other generic types of poems, are all included. Poetic forms such as epigram and elegy are closely linked, for generic boundaries are fluid.[14] Such crossings are the key to Horatian lyric: both odes and epodes are a mixture of their forbears, plus Hellenistic influence, rhetorical figures and much else besides. Other genres show similar crossings: epyllion and epic tend to affect each other's development; epistle

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[11] Rossi, 'I Generi Letterari', p. 83: 'questa terza epoca scrive le leggi, sì, ma per violarle'.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

[13] Wilhelm Kroll, 'Die Kreuzung der Gattungen', chapter 9 of *Studien zum Verständnis der römischen Literatur* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1964 reprint of 1924 edn), pp. 202–24, quotation from p. 202.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 208: 'die Grenzen sind fließend'.

has a tendency to mix with other genres, such as moral philosophy (e.g. Seneca) or elegy (Ovid's *Heroides*); direct speech gets mixed with forms such as hymns, lyrics, mime or elegy. Finally, Kroll turns his attention to Petronius' *Satyricon*, which he sees as a mixture of many genres, and so finds its unity in the author's talent rather than in a classification.

Thus we must conceive of literature as a network of relationships with flexible boundaries. Genre experimentation and overlap, Kroll's 'Kreuzung' or Rossi's 'mistione dei generi',[15] is a key concept for study of both ancient biography and the gospels themselves.

## 3  Genre in composition and evaluation

Francis Cairns stresses that until one knows the generic make-up of any poem, its quality and the ability of the poet cannot be assessed. His argument may be summarized as follows: first, although many poems may seem incomplete or inconsistent, we must accept the text as we have it, rather than chop it about to fit a prior notion of genre. Instead, the solution to the difficulties is to be found in the fact that ancient poems and speeches 'are members of classes of literature known in antiquity as γένη or εἴδη, which will be described in this book as *genres*'. Genres are to be defined, not in terms of *form* (e.g. epic, lyric, epistle), but in terms of *content* and can be identified by two sets of elements: the primary elements, which are the persons, situations or functions which are logically necessary for the genre, and the secondary elements, which are the *topoi*, the 'smallest divisions of the material' which appear in many different genres. The knowledge of the genres and their primary and secondary elements constitute an agreed body of knowledge between the poet and his audience: 'These writings assume in the reader a knowledge of the circumstances and content of the particular genre to which they belong, and they exploit this knowledge.' Thus writer and audience share a 'common background'.[16] Such generic expectation was 'part of the cultural and social heritage of all educated men in antiquity' and because the genres were used in primary school exercises, 'they can be considered as the minimum formal rhetorical equipment of any literate person from the Hellenistic period on'.[17] Only against such

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[15] Rossi, 'I Generi Letterari', p. 84.

[16] Cairns, *Generic Composition*, 1972, pp. 6–7.

[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 37 and 75.

expectation can originality and sophistication be judged. We are to expect, therefore, an early initial announcement of the poem's genre to alert us to the expected primary elements and *topoi*. In the light of these expectations, the poet may then proceed to generic sophistication using many different techniques, such as the introduction of new *topoi* or the selection and rearrangement of the standard *topoi*; alteration, expansion or contraction of *topoi*; the inversion of the genre, providing the opposite from that which the audience is expecting; reaction of speaker or addressee with new material, or variation of speaker and addressee; and the inclusion of new genres within the one dominant genre of the poem.

Cairns is convinced of the value of such generic studies for two reasons: first, that it helps the modern reader to understand poems or works which may seem confused initially because of the lack of the assumed shared background, and secondly because it helps the appreciation of the artist's originality and skill, by permitting observation of how he works within his chosen genre. Once again, genre is seen as an 'agreed contract' between author and reader, assisting with correct interpretation and proper evaluation.

However, it has been argued that in his attempt to demonstrate the importance of genre, Cairns has overplayed his hand. Jasper Griffin has questioned the basic assumption that ancient literature existed in 'a time-free zone', in which the theoretical writings of later rhetoricians may be used to assess the poetry of earlier generations. In fact, the rhetoricians derived their material and generic names originally from the poets themselves, and so they cannot be used as the judges over the poets: 'Many of the alleged "genres" do not exist in the ancient texts and have to be invented and named by the contemporary scholar.'[18] Furthermore, Cairns' method of evaluating poems, according to how well they fit their genre, seems to turn poetic appreciation upside down: poems like Theocritus' *Idylls* 12 and 17, not normally considered to be of high merit, are to be esteemed because they exemplify their genre so well.[19] One is reminded of Hack's assessment that the best poems of Horace are the very ones which break the rules. Griffin concludes his critique of Cairns by pleading that the poems must be considered as primary, and that the poets derived their forms not

[18] Griffin, 'Genre and Real Life in Latin Poetry', *JRS* 71 (1981), pp. 39–49, quotation from p. 40; 'time-free zone' idea in Cairns, *Generic Composition*, p. 32.
[19] Griffin, 'Genre and Real Life in Latin Poetry', p. 41.

from the rhetoricians, but from real life experiences of saying farewell to friends, or being shut out at night by a lover.

Griffin's critique is at its strongest in the attack on Cairns for making the later rhetoricians dominant in generic analysis. On the other hand, Cairns' stress on the importance of genre in literary appreciation as a kind of agreement between author and reader does fit in well with our study of the literary theory of genres in Chapter 2 above. Where his case is perhaps vulnerable is in his use of the term 'genre' at a much 'lower' level – to denote different types of poem or units within them, defined totally in terms of content alone. It would seem better, using Fowler's terminology, to see this as the level of subtype, or subgenre, or literary unit – and to keep genre for the description of a whole work, defined in terms of both form and content.

Thus we may conclude that classicists also view genre not as something rigid or static, defined by a predetermined set of laws or rhetorical rules, but as something dynamic and flexible, encompassing both form and content. Secondly, the boundaries of genre are flexible and hard to delineate precisely. Consciously and unconsciously, authors import new material across these boundaries to alter and develop the genres, mixing them as part of their artistic sophistication; therefore, models of genre with an element of spectrum or continuum about them will be more helpful than concepts of pigeon-holes or strict classifications. Finally, a correct understanding of the genre of a work will enable the modern reader to share in the common background of an ancient author and his audience, and thus to be able to interpret and evaluate the work more accurately. We may now turn, therefore, from this general study of the use of genre by classicists to the particular genre in which we are interested, namely Graeco-Roman biography.

### B    The genre of Graeco-Roman biography

#### 1    Terminology and definitions

The immediate problem to be faced in discussing Graeco-Roman biography is that it was never strongly delineated as a genre by the ancients. Indeed, the word *biographia* does not appear until Damascius' *Life of Isidorus*, written in the fifth century AD, but only preserved by the ninth-century writer, Photius. Momigliano

points out that the description used from the Hellenistic age onwards was simply 'Lives', βίοι, or *vitae*.[20] This nomenclature is clear from its use on manuscripts (Satyrus' Βίων ᾽Αναγραφή) and in ancient references to such works, e.g. Eunapius' comment that Lucian Δημώνακτος φιλοσόφου ... βίον ἀνέγραψεν (Eun. *VS* 454). In addition, it is the word used by Plutarch to describe his own work: γράφομεν .. βίους (*Alex.* 1.2) or τη περὶ τοὺς βίους ἀναγραφη (*Per.* 2.4; see also *Comparison Lys./Sulla* 1.1).

The ancient literary theory of the genre is no clearer than the nomenclature. As Geiger has pointed out, the genres of prose were never as clearly fixed as those of poetry; he considers it a 'futile path that led to the reconstruction of ancient literary theory' about biography and suggests that it may be more profitable to use modern conceptions.[21] Momigliano has a simple definition: 'An account of the life of a man from birth to death is what I call biography.' This, he says, is not profound but it has the merit at least of excluding from the definition precisely how biography is to be written.[22] Both the definitions offered by C.H. Talbert and David Aune have such limitations, asserting that biography must be prose narrative and including comments about its purpose and supposed historicity.[23] While not going as far as these, Geiger criticizes Momigliano for defining the genre solely in terms of content; accordingly, he prefers the definition offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'the history of the lives of individual men, as a branch of literature'. Thus a line is drawn between 'biographical elements in various literary forms' and 'a literary form devoted to biography'[24] – our distinction of mode and genre.

However, it is precisely the use of modern concepts of 'biography' which led Bultmann and the form critics to deny that the gospels are biographies: Marxsen refers to 'the absence of everything required for a biography (sequence of events, development, Jesus' appearance, etc.)'.[25] Here the implications of using the modern word 'biography' are clear: if such things are 'required' as

[20] Photius, *Bibliotheca* 181 and 242; see Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Harvard: University Press, 1971), p. 12.
[21] Joseph Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1985), pp. 12–14.
[22] Momigliano, *Development*, p. 11.
[23] Talbert, *What is a Gospel?*, p. 17; Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, p. 29.
[24] Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos*, pp. 14–15.
[25] Willi Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), p. 125; see also p. 10 above.

Marxsen put it, then many Graeco-Roman βίοι are not biography either. All of these definitions have the problem of defining in advance what this genre will look like. Some βίοι will relate to history, but not all; some will give 'an account from birth to death', but not all include the subject's death (especially autobiography!). In this study, therefore, we shall use simply 'Lives' – βίοι – and see what sort of texts are described as that within the ancient world.

## 2  Theory and practice

This lack of a clear theory of the genre of βίος is evident in some of the authors' prefaces to their works. We have already warned against over-reliance on such prefaces, preferring to examine the authors' actual practice in the texts themselves. Shuler seems convinced that his study of the authors' statements in Polybius, *Histories* X.21.8, Cicero's Letter to Lucceius (*Ad Fam.* V.12.3), Lucian's *How to Write History* 7, Nepos' *De viris illustribus* XVI: *Pelopidas* 1 and Plutarch's *Alexander* 1.1–3 demonstrates a clear 'dichotomy' or 'distinction between history and biography' in ancient thought over four centuries.[26] In fact, Polybius and Lucian are distinguishing not biography, but *encomium* from history, and Cicero is merely asking for more eulogy of himself in Lucceius' history than would normally be allowed by the canons of history. Although Nepos and Plutarch are contrasting βίοι with history, these passages demonstrate the difficulty they are having with their accounts rather than a clear 'dichotomy' in their minds. Nepos is unsure how to proceed, how much to put in or to leave out: 'dubito quem ad modum exponam'.

Plutarch's famous introduction to the *Alexander* is often quoted and worth detailed attention. He attempts to distinguish ἱστορία from βίοι, which he is writing. History, says Plutarch, is concerned for the famous actions and illustrious deeds of men and for great events like sieges or battles; βίος is interested in men's character, which may be revealed by 'little things' (πρᾶγμα βραχὺ) like the odd phrase or jest. First we must note is that Plutarch is cautious in his choice of words: illustrious deeds do not *always* (πάντως) reveal virtue or vice – but they may do quite often, whereas the little things show character *often* (πολλάκις) rather than always. Thus the distinction Plutarch is drawing is certainly not to be construed as a hard and fast rule.

[26] Shuler, *A Genre for the Gospels*, pp. 36–40.

Secondly, we need to ask why Plutarch felt the need to discuss the difference between history and βίος at this point, about a third of the way through the whole corpus of the *Lives*.[27] Geiger has pointed out that we only get such apologies and protests in ancient *political* biography because there is 'a clear danger of transcending the limits of the literary genre and slipping into history'. Intellectual biography, lives of philosophers or literary men, does not have this problem and therefore we do not find similar statements in their prefaces.[28] In fact, Plutarch does include much historical material, great events, battles and politics in his *Lives*, and like other ancient historians feels the need to apologize about digressions; as Wardman concludes, 'it can only be that he is, so to say, genre-conscious; and the genre by which he is still constrained is historiography'.[29]

Given all this, the reason for his explanation here is quite straightforward: 'It was simply that his current subjects were too vast to admit every detail.'[30] Plutarch has too much material about Alexander and therefore this introduction is an apology to readers who notice the omissions. The same difficulty occurred with the *Pompey*, which, like *Alexander*, is one of the longest of Plutarch's *Lives*; here also we find similar apologies for omissions, see *Pompey* 8.6. In other *Lives*, he has the reverse problem: thus the *Marcellus* requires padding to approximate to the length of its partner, *Pelopidas*, and even with several digressions it still only manages to be half the length of the *Alexander* or *Pompey*. Plutarch is similarly selective when discussing a person whose life will be well known to his readers from their prior knowledge of the great historians; e.g., about Nicias because of Thucydides' account of the Sicilian expedition, or about Cyrus' death in the *Artaxerxes*, known from Xenophon's account.[31] Thus the omissions, and the explanations for them found in the prefaces, are less to do with biographical theory than with constraints of space and material available.

Thus, important though this introduction to the *Alexander* is as an insight into Plutarch's concept of what he is writing, once again

27 A.E. Wardman, 'Plutarch's Methods in the *Lives*', *CQ* 21 (1971), pp. 254–61, see p. 257; and also, C.P. Jones, 'Towards a Chronology of Plutarch's Works', *JRS* 56 (1966), pp. 66–70.
28 Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos*, pp. 20–3 and 113–15; quotation from p. 114.
29 A.E. Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives* (London: Paul Elek, 1974), p. 9.
30 Baldwin, 'Biography at Rome', p. 103; see also D.A. Russell, *Plutarch* (London: Duckworth, 1972), pp. 115–16 for the same point.
31 Wardman, 'Plutarch's Methods', *CQ* (1971), pp. 258–9.

we have seen that a theoretical comment in a preface must be approached with caution. The *Alexander* remarks 'are not to be taken in isolation' for they do not apply across the board to all his biographies.[32] We may conclude, therefore, that these prefaces and programmatic statements do *not* show that all the ancient writers had a clear literary theory of βίος distinguished from other genres; on the contrary, they show their embarrassment at the mixing of the genres and the possibility of confusion with neighbouring genres.

### 3 The mixing of genres – *genera proxima*

The concept of flexible generic boundaries with 'crossings' fits better with models in terms of a spectrum or continuum than rigid pigeonholes. Thus we may imagine βίος as a spectrum or band of literature positioned between history at one extreme and encomium at the other, as follows:

$$\text{History} \equiv = \text{---} = \equiv \beta\text{íος} \equiv = \text{---} = \equiv \text{Encomium}$$

Certain works may be close to the boundary at one end – such as obvious encomia like Isocrates' *Evagoras* or Xenophon's *Agesilaus* with their close links with rhetoric; while at the other extreme the border with history is unclear – and hence the struggles of Nepos or Plutarch. Even the historian has a tendency to straddle the boundary from time to time, and we find elements of biography in Tacitus' *Annals*, for instance.[33] McQueen suggests that the work of Quintus Curtius Rufus also might be seen as 'a fusion of the two genres'. There is, however, a third element in Curtius, his literary and moralizing tendencies, which display his rhetorical abilities. In such passages, says McQueen, 'the biographer and historian is overcome by the rhetorician'.[34] At this point, then, we discover that even the spectrum is an unhelpful model – because Curtius cannot be overlapping at both ends simultaneously. What is needed is a concept where βίος can relate to a number of different *genera proxima* at the same time, including, as mentioned, history, encomium, rhetoric and moralizing – but also other genres such as

32 Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives*, p. 160; see also, *CQ* (1971), p. 261.
33 Baldwin, 'Biography at Rome', p. 114; Ronald Syme, 'History or Biography. The Case of Tiberius Caesar', *Historia* 23 (1974), pp. 481–96.
34 E.I. McQueen, 'Quintus Curtius Rufus', in *Latin Biography*, ed. T.A. Dorey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 17–43; quotations from pp. 20 and 32.

the entertaining story or early novel and a link with the didactic genres of philosophical and political beliefs, teachings and polemic. The boundaries between βίος and any of the *genera proxima* are flexible, and so borrowing or sharing of generic features across the border is to be expected. As we have already noted, genre maps are notoriously difficult and misleading if taken to have some fixed or absolute worth. However, the kind of picture we are trying to describe may be represented like this:
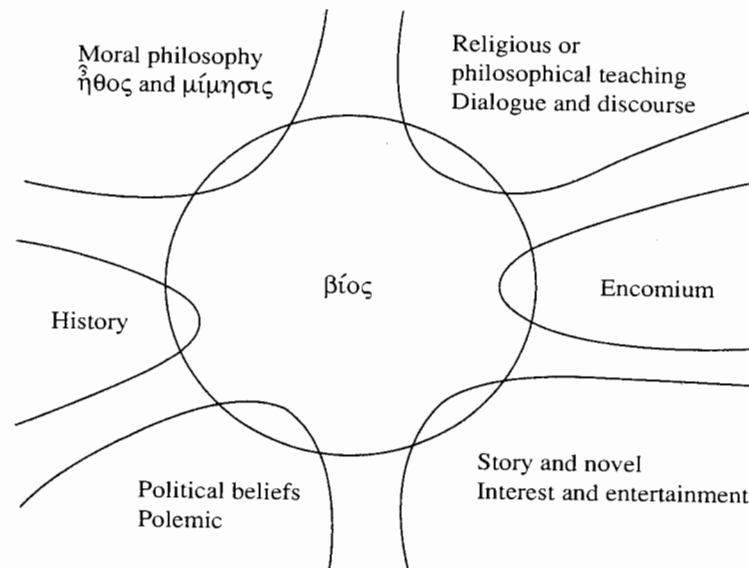


Figure 1

It must, of course, be borne in mind that such a representation applies from the point of view of βίος only. Here we are trying to represent the relationships of the *genera proxima* to βίος, and not necessarily to each other. A different picture could be drawn by placing another genre at the centre, such as history, and seeing which genres relate to that. However, such a diagram helps us to see where the different levels of genre operate, in that the actual genre of βίος itself is the central circle, which may contain any number of *subgenres*, whereas the biographical *mode* may be found operating in any of the *genera proxima* beyond βίος proper.

If we try to apply this model to Plutarch, it is clear that the most

obvious generic neighbour is history, as Wardman emphasizes. He is less convinced about a link with encomium: 'The eulogy or encomium is to be regarded as a distant forbear of Plutarchian biography.'[35] Pelling disagrees and criticizes Wardman's treatment of encomium as 'uneasy and narrow'.[36] The amount of overlap from history or encomium can vary from *Life* to *Life*: some only have the sketchiest historical background (e.g. *Alcibiades, Cato Minor, Crassus* or *Antony*), whereas others, such as *Caesar*, have detailed historical analysis: 'Plutarch's biography is a very flexible genre, and his interest in historical background is one of the things which vary.'[37]

The other generic border which Plutarch tends to straddle is with moral philosophy, through his interest in character. Plutarch's concern for moral philosophy is evident by his other writings, notably the *Moralia*, and he is concerned that the readers of the *Lives* should learn from his description of these characters how to live their lives, through imitation, μίμησις (see the opening sections of the *Pericles, Aemilius, Demosthenes*). Most of the characters depicted are good, for our emulation – though some are weak, displaying κακία, such as Antony or Demetrius. So here we have another crossing of the genres: 'The *Lives* therefore are, for Plutarch, moral philosophy in another genre.'[38] It is important to note that this mixing of the genres takes place simultaneously; it is not the case that Plutarch is being an historian one minute and moralizing another. 'Plutarch is as much a moralist as an historian even where he is relating rather commonplace historical matter. His major interest is in illuminating the virtues or vices of a hero through the type of "insignificant" detail which he felt was often overlooked by the major historians.'[39] In fact, his moralistic and literary interests could even assist the difficult historical choice of which heroes to include in his *Parallel Lives*: Geiger argues that Aemilius Paulus and Timoleon found their way into the series

35 Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives*, pp. 1–18, quotation from p. 10; see also, Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos*, p. 23.
36 In his review of Wardman's *Plutarch's Lives* in *JHS* 1976, pp. 189–90.
37 C.B.R. Pelling, 'Plutarch and Roman Politics', in *Studies in the Ancient Historians*, ed. Woodman, Moxon and Smart (CUP, 1985), p. 159.
38 Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives*, p. 37; see also, A.J. Gossage, 'Plutarch', in *Latin Biography*, ed. Dorey, p. 49.
39 F.E. Brenk, *In Mist Apparelled: Religious Themes in Plutarch's Moralia and Lives*, *Mnemosyne* Supplementum 48 (Leiden, 1977), p. 184; see also, Russell, *Plutarch*, pp. 115–16.

because of their common denominator of τύχη, with lives being lived with courage in the face of Fate.[40]

## 4  A flexible genre

The picture has now emerged of the genre of βίος nestling between history, encomium and moral philosophy, with overlaps and relationships in all directions. Plutarch has been used as an example to illustrate these last sections, and we can now conclude with some observations on the flexibility of the genre, also taken from Plutarch. By careful study of some of the Roman *Lives*, Christopher Pelling concluded that six of them were written together at the same time, drawing on the same sources and information: the *Crassus, Pompey, Caesar, Cato Minor, Brutus* and *Antony*.[41] Any differences between them must be due to Plutarch's literary methods, therefore, and so we can study how he went about his writing and how much licence he allowed himself. For our study, the significant conclusions concern the relationship between Plutarch's biographical theory and practice. We have already seen how the introduction to *Alexander* (paired with *Caesar*) differentiates history and βίος. Pelling cites other similar passages in Plutarch, such as *Nic.* 1 and *Aem.* 1.1, and concludes: 'The theory is clear and consistent. Biography will often concentrate on personal details, and may abbreviate its historical narrative; its concern will be the portrayal of character, and its ultimate purpose will be protreptic and moral.'[42]

When this theory is tested against the actual texts, some *Lives* fit it very well: both *Pompey* and *Cato* stress the central character, with lessons being pointed out and morals drawn, often by means of the 'little things' mentioned in *Alex.* 1.2. These two examples are personal, moralistic and non-historical. However, others of the *Lives* written at the same time are quite different. *Caesar* has more historical material and very few 'little things'; there is little moralizing or concern for Caesar's ἦθος – instead the work is dominated

by the notion of Caesar as tyrant of the people, the δῆμος/τυραννίς motif. *Antony* is different again; here there is little history, but great depiction of character. While there may be some moralizing, the interest in character is much more dramatic, even tragic, especially towards the end. Thus works written simultaneously from the same sources end up with quite different configurations and relationships to the *genera proxima* – while all the time remaining βίοι. So Pelling concludes: 'A writer's programmatic statements can sometimes be a poor guide to his work, and some Lives fit Plutarch's theory better than others ... This biographical genre is an extremely flexible one, and admits works of very different patterns.'[43]

## 5  Summary

The use of genre theory among classicists is similar to that seen in modern literary theory. Genre is an important convention, which sets up certain expectations for the reader by way of an agreed, though sometimes unconscious, contract. An awareness of genre and its conventions was widespread in the ancient world through elementary schooling, particularly in its use of rhetorical exercises and moralistic stories of the heroes. Genre criticism has a role to play, therefore, in both the interpretation and evaluation of ancient texts. However, we have also seen a divergence between ancient theory and practice. Theoretical statements, particularly those in authors' prefaces and in the later rhetoricians and grammarians, must always be tested against the actual practice of the writers themselves in their texts. Often this will reveal a failure to apply the theory strictly, and sometimes the greater the divergence from theory, the greater the literary creativity of the author.

Ancient genres were flexible and existed within the whole web of literary relationships of their day. There was plenty of scope for mixing and overlap at the boundaries of the genres, with a resulting rich mix of other features within the genre itself. This is true of Graeco-Roman biography in general and Plutarch's βίοι in particular. Ancient βίος was a flexible genre having strong relationships with history, encomium and rhetoric, moral philosophy and the concern for character.

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[40] J. Geiger, 'Plutarch's Parallel Lives: The Choice of Heroes', *Hermes*, 109 (1981), pp. 85–104, see the conclusion on p. 104; see also, Gossage, 'Plutarch', pp. 60–1; C.P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (OUP, 1971), p. 105; J.R. Hamilton, *Plutarch: Alexander, A Commentary*, (OUP 1969), pp. xxxiii–xxxiv.

[41] C.B.R. Pelling, 'Plutarch's Method of Work in the Roman Lives', *JHS* 99 (1979), pp. 74–96.

[42] C.B.R. Pelling, 'Plutarch's Adaptation of his Source Material', *JHS* 100 (1980), pp. 127–40; quotation from p. 135.

[43] Pelling, 'Plutarch's Adaptation', *JHS* 1980, p. 139; see further, Pelling, 'Plutarch and Roman Politics', pp. 159–87; Gossage, 'Plutarch', pp. 53–60.

## C  Greek and Hellenistic biography

### 1  The origins of Greek biography

A tight definition of biography will only allow us to begin our survey in the fourth century BC with the writings produced by the philosophical schools, which is where Leo and Dihle commence their studies.[44] On the other hand, interest in the lives of others clearly goes back a lot further. Stuart sees various factors behind βίος: an interest in epic heroes; individual poetry, such as lyric or elegiac; tragedy; and the funeral dirge over the dead, starting with Andromache's for Hector, *Iliad* 24.720ff., and going on to prose encomium, or eulogy over the dead.[45] Momigliano prefers to see anecdotes, sayings, letters and apologetic speeches as the true antecedents. Several factors combine to produce biography in the fifth century: an interest in literary antiquity, in the lives of both the heroes and the bards themselves, and also in the lives of the Seven Sages. The specific catalyst was perhaps Persian in origin, in that the first Greek biographical works are written by those in the service of the Great King, at the same time as biographical writing is appearing in the Jewish tradition through Nehemiah and possibly Ezra, as well as the Aḥiqar traditions among the Elephantine Jews.[46] The interest in individuals can also be seen in the development of historiography: Homeyer sees many mini-biographies in Herodotus, particularly the stories about Cyrus or Cambyses, which issue forth in both Thucydides' interest in people like Themistocles, as well as the work of Isocrates and Xenophon.[47]

### 2  The first writers

The first biographical writings, if not yet βίοι proper, are found in the fifth century BC, often known to us from fragments or references in later authors. Skylax of Caryanda, *c*. 480 BC, wrote an

[44] Friedrich Leo, *Die griechisch-römische Biographie nach ihrer literarischen Form* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1901); A. Dihle, *Studien zur griechischen Biographie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1st edn 1956, 2nd edn 1970); the best list of βίοι from the fifth century BC to the fourth century AD is probably to be found on pp. 1231–6 of Klaus Berger's article, 'Hellenistische Gattungen im NT', in *ANRW*, II.25.2.

[45] D.R. Stuart, *Epochs of Greek and Roman Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1928), pp. 9–29, 38–9.

[46] Momigliano, *Development*, pp. 23–8, 35–6.

[47] Helene Homeyer, 'Zu den Anfängen der griechischen Biographie', *Philologus* 106 (1962), pp. 75–85.

autobiographical prose account of his voyaging for Darius, and also a work about Heraclides, king of Mylasa, according to the *Suda*. Ion of Chios, *c*. 440, wrote of his travels and *Visits* to interesting people; the fragments include anecdotal mentions of Cimon, Pericles and Sophocles. Stesimbrotus, *c*. 420?, produced a pamphlet 'Concerning Themistocles, Thucydides and Pericles' which seems to have had biographical interest as well as political motives. Xanthus of Lydia, *c*. 421/410, wrote about Empedocles the philosopher (according to Diogenes Laertius, *Emped.* VIII.63).[48]

Geiger is reluctant to claim such works as 'biographies'; however, such 'biographical elements' do help to illuminate the roots of biography itself.[49] From such works, and from the developing interest in individuals, the various elements which will form βίος eventually begin to come together from the neighbouring genres. Biographical writings certainly existed during the fifth century BC, and the first actual βίοι may have been written during this time, but are no longer preserved today.

### 3  The fourth century

Three main factors are usually adduced to explain why βίοι start to be written in the fourth century: a new political mood, in which the individual is more prominent than in fifth-century collectivism, philosophical concerns and interest in the individual philosophers, and rhetorical interest through the use of encomiastic speeches. Isocrates claims to be the first to write prose encomium in the *Evagoras*, *c*. 370 BC, and Xenophon probably followed this as a model for his *Agesilaus*, *c*. 360 BC; both of these works will be considered in more detail in Chapter 6 below.

Biographical interests occur in much other material during this period. Crucial as a stimulus to βίος was the production of material about Socrates, notably Plato's *Dialogues* and *Apology*, and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* which combines anecdote and memoir to illustrate the character of Socrates as a defence against his

[48] For more details of these generally, see Stuart, *Epochs*, pp. 30–59; Momigliano, *Development*, pp. 23–42; and Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity*, pp. 5–6. On Ion, see K.J. Dover, 'Ion of Chios: His Place in the History of Greek Literature', in *Chios: A Conference at the Homereion in Chios, 1984*, ed. John Boardman and C.E. Vaphopoulou-Richardson (OUP, 1986), pp. 27–37; for Stesimbrotus, see C.B.R. Pelling, 'Childhood and Personality in Greek Biography', in *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature*, ed. Pelling (OUP, 1990), p. 214, and note 8.

[49] Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos*, pp. 14–15.

detractors. Geiger sees the urge to write about philosophers, especially Socrates, as an important factor in the development of the 'new literary genre'; politicians and statesmen could be dealt with by historiography. Dihle likewise stresses the role of Socrates.[50] Isocrates also included some biographical material in many speeches, including on Alcibiades in *Concerning the Team of Horses*, a speech composed for Alcibiades' son in *c.* 397, and some autobiographical material in *About the Exchange, c.* 354. As well as *Evagoras*, he also wrote prose encomia of *Helen, c.* 370, and *Busiris, c.* 385, although since both have mythical subjects, these are in the tradition of epideictic ('for display') rhetoric rather than βίοι proper. Xenophon included detailed character sketches of the generals in his *Anabasis, c.* 385. His *Cyropaedia* is described by Momigliano as 'the most accomplished biography we have in classical Greek literature', although its mainly fictitious character means that the description of 'paedagogical novel' is more accurate.[51] Cyrus was also the subject of writings by Antisthenes. Autobiographical material appears in the *Anabasis*, and in Plato's *Epistle* 7 (if considered genuine).

From these examples we can see how βίος literature is taking shape in relation to its neighbouring genres of history, rhetoric, encomium and entertainment – and in one or two cases, the description of βίος itself might not be inappropriate, even if we have not yet reached a full genre.

### 4 Aristotle and the philosophical schools

Aristotle and his school, with their great interest in research, analysis and definition, take the crucial step. Although Aristotle wrote no biography himself, biographical material abounds in his writings in the form of anecdotes, sayings and apt remarks (ἀποφθέγματα, γνῶμαι, χρεῖαι) and examples (παραδείγματα). Work develops on individual writers and poets, as well as particular philosophers and the different schools and approaches. Aristoxenus is often seen as the 'founder' of biography.[52] According to the story, Aristoxenus, annoyed because Theopompus was preferred

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50 Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos*, pp. 19–20; Dihle, *Studien*, pp. 13–34.
51 Momigliano, *Development*, p. 55.
52 Leo, *Die griechisch-römische Biographie*, p. 102; Momigliano considers philosophical influence to be less important for the development of βίοι in *Second Thoughts on Greek Biography* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1971), see esp. pp. 14–15.

over him as Aristotle's successor, went off in a huff to write a βίος of Socrates which would show all his faults. In this, Aristoxenus, who was a Pythagorean before coming to the Peripatos, attacks Socrates for plagiarizing Pythagoreanism. He also wrote other βίοι of philosophers.

References, quotations and fragments of the work of other writers are known, although, since none of these works have survived, it is not always clear which are writers of true βίος and which just collectors of stories or encomiasts;[53] given our picture of the flexible nature of βίος evolving from its neighbouring genres, this border confusion is only to be expected at this stage. These philosophical writers include Clearchus who wrote on Plato. Phainias of Eresus wrote *On the Socratics, On the Sicilian Tyrants* and *On Poets*, and also a monograph on his home town. Demetrius of Phalerum may have written about Demosthenes; Diogenes Laertius and Plutarch quote from a work by him on Socrates, possibly a rejoinder to Aristoxenus. Diogenes also makes use of material from Dicaearchus of Messene; his work, Περὶ βίων, may have been a collection of βίοι, and there is an interesting use of the word βίος in his account of the development of Greek civilization entitled Περὶ τοῦ τῆς Ἑλλάδος βίου.[54]

Two types of function seem to have been in mind for these early βίοι: interest and information about previous philosophers or writers, but also a clear tradition of their use for polemical ends in the continuing philosophical debate between the different schools.

### 5 Hellenistic biography and Alexandria

During the third century BC, the house of Macedon influenced literature as everything else. Biographical literature and encomia are produced, including Theopompus' *Philippica* (*c.* 345) and Ephorus' work on Alexander and the Diadochi – all unfortunately now lost; from such works the tradition of Alexander literature begins. The interest in philosophers continues: Antigonus of Carys-

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53 See Fritz Wehrli, *Die Schule des Aristoteles*, 10 vols., (Basel: Schwabe & Co, 1967–9) for the fragments; for further discussion see Momigliano, *Development*, pp. 66–79, who is cautious about how many are true biographers, other than Aristoxenus; Stuart, *Epochs*, pp. 119–54, who believes Aristoxenus is not unique or alone; and Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos*, pp. 51–5.
54 For the influence of Dicaearchus upon the late Republic at Rome, especially on Atticus, Nepos and Varro (who followed the idea of βίος of a people with his *De vita populi Romani*), see Elizabeth Rawson, *Intellectual Life in the Late Republic* (London: Duckworth, 1985), pp. 101–3.

tus wrote Lives of philosophers, possibly at Pergamum, *c.* 250. At Alexandria, Callimachus and his circle amassed vast quantities of data and information for the libraries; to supplement ancient texts, anecdotes and stories about the authors were sought – produced as small βίοι. Hermippus, *c.* 200, used this material for his βίοι of the Seven Sages, Pythagoras, Gorgias, Aristotle and others – what Momigliano calls 'learned sensationalism',[55] so typical of the Alexandrian style. Aristo of Ceos, *c.* 200, wrote on Epicurus, Socrates and Heraclitus. Sotion, *c.* 180, used Callimachus' files to produce his *Succession of the Philosophers*, later to influence Diogenes Laertius. Satyrus wrote about men of letters and was not above indulging in the old habit of deducing 'facts' about their lives from authors' works. His *Life of Euripides*, from Book VI of his βίων ἀναγραφή, is in dialogue form with a dramatic atmosphere. Since this is the earliest work to survive, albeit fragmentary, with the actual name of βίος, we shall study it in Chapter 6.

Thus, this period continues the broad mix, enriched by Callimachean interest in general information. βίος can be used for propaganda, for philosophical debate and polemic, or just for descriptive and informative purposes, revealing a person's character through anecdotes and stories. There are various *topoi* basic to them all, such as nationality, parentage, early pursuits, education, death and burial, as well as specific areas related to each individual, morals, virtues, deeds and so on. The manner or tone is not often neutral, but argues for praise or blame of the subject. Here the overlap between βίος and encomium easily occurs, as well as that with history. Exact delineation of where each text belongs would not be easy; with only references and quotations in later digests, such as Diogenes Laertius', precision is impossible.

## 6  Classification

Leo's great analysis of Graeco-Roman biography distinguished two main strands: the *Plutarchian* with Peripatetic origins and arranged around a chronological structure, used for men of action and politics, and the *Suetonian*, more systematically or topically ordered from Alexandrian origins, for literary men. Such a neat division is appealing, but not easy to prove with the lack of evidence from this time. Indeed, more recent study of ancient biography

55 Momigliano, *Development*, p. 79; see pp. 79–89 for this period, and also Stuart, *Epochs*, pp. 155–88.

shows that topically based studies of philosophers and writers were around long before the Alexandrian period. Any distinction of approach probably reflects the fact that men of action require their deeds to be dealt with chronologically whereas it is easier to handle someone's literary output or philosophical ideas by a topical arrangement. Momigliano says that Leo's brilliant analysis cannot be sustained since 'Hellenistic literary biography was far more elegant and sophisticated than Leo had thought'.[56]

Furthermore, Geiger has disputed whether the Plutarchian, political biography does go back to the Peripatetics; the use of Jerome's introduction to *De viris illustribus* in the search for Hellenistic political biography has been a 'blind avenue'.[57] Against Leo and Steidle's arguments, he suggests that no real examples of this form of βίος are known; two genres are well attested at this time, namely the historical monograph and the intellectual biography of writers and philosophers. The deeds of generals and politicians could be recorded in historical writings, but philosophical and literary figures like Socrates needed the new form; political biography proper is a child of Roman times. Once again, therefore, we are back to the flexible nature of this genre and its hazy boundaries with neighbours like history and encomium.

### D  Roman biography

#### 1  The origins of Roman biography

Leo sought the origins of Plutarch and Suetonius in Peripatetic and Alexandrian biography, but Stuart is not convinced: the systematic arrangement of Suetonius is basic to the logical Roman mind, and he was 'a compiler extraordinary, a chronic lexicographer'.[58] Furthermore, many elements within the Roman tradition were predisposed to produce biography: concern for details, respect for one's ancestors and family tradition, the need for public honour, all led to an indigenous tradition of biographical material. Specific antecedents can be found in epitaphs and inscriptions; in the dirge and the funeral laudation; in the *Tabularium* in the Forum (the

56 Momigliano, *Second Thoughts*, pp. 10–11.
57 Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos*, p. 32; Moles' review suggested that Geiger's overall argument is itself 'too clear-cut' for the complexity and flexibility of the material, CR 39 (1989), pp. 229–33.
58 Stuart, *Epochs*, p. 230; see further pp. 189–220; also Momigliano, *Development*, pp. 94–5 and Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos*, pp. 78–84.

state archives) and in family records and the *imagines* of the ancestors. Many basic features of these records are biographical: lineage; career, honours or offices gained; salient incidents; domestic life. Behind all this is the exemplary motive so descendants can emulate the *exempla maiorum*. An exemplary purpose in writing was important in much Roman historiography as well as later biography.

## 2 The Republic

Biographical literature starts to appear at the end of the Republic. In *c.* 44 BC, Varro published his *Imagines*, 700 portraits of famous kings, leaders, poets, philosophers and writers, each accompanied with an epigram. Roman biography gets properly under way with Cornelius Nepos: born *c.* 99 BC in the Po valley, he moved to Rome *c.* 65 to live a quiet life writing. It is possible that he was influenced by Varro, although this is debated.[59] In his main work, *De viris illustribus*, the distinction of 'Plutarchian' and 'Suetonian' biography again breaks down for some Lives do have a clear chronology, while others are more topically arranged and anecdotal. The work is dedicated to the Roman knight and patron, Atticus – and in his apologetic opening, Nepos is not unaware that he is starting something new: 'non dubito fore plerosque, Attice, qui hoc genus scripturae leve et non satis dignum summorum virorum personis iudicent' (Praefatio 1.1). Nepos' *Life of Atticus*, his only extant contemporary biography, will be included in our detailed study in Chapter 6.

Part of the Roman tradition tending naturally towards biography was the custom of publishing autobiographical memoirs – *Commentarii*. Often a trusted slave-secretary would produce an 'authorized version' of letters or memoirs, as Tiro did for Cicero. In the Civil Wars at the end of the Republic the different sides sought to put their views across, as in Caesar's *Commentaries*, for example. A whole range of material was produced concerning Cato, the last great Republican leader, who committed suicide at Utica in 46 BC rather than fall into the hands of Caesar. Again biography is used for polemic and propaganda purposes as Cato became 'the focal point of a vivid literary polemic with scarcely

[59] See Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos*, pp. 81–2.

hidden political overtones'.[60] Plutarch's biography of him will be studied in Chapter 7.

## 3 The early Empire

During the early Empire, the use of biography for political purposes continues with the propaganda of the imperial house, begun by Augustus' *Res Gestae* – a list of his great deeds for the nation and the honours he received in return. The surviving fragments of Nicolas of Damascus' *Life of Augustus* describe the rise of the young Octavian to become heir to Caesar, in an encomiastic way with analysis of his virtues.[61] On the other side, biography becomes a vehicle for unorthodox political or philosophical ideas. The focus around Cato continued: when Thrasea Paetus retired from active politics under Nero, he wrote a *Life of Cato*, probably as a statement of his own position – and this may have contributed to his death: 'The composition of the *Cato* was a political act and a declaration of faith.'[62] Thrasea himself became the subject of a political biography by Arulenus Rusticus, while Herennius Senecio wrote one about Helvidius Priscus. Both authors and their texts perished as subversive under Domitian in AD 93. These texts probably focussed on the ideal of the hero and his patient suffering and death under the tyrant. The genre of *exitus illustrium virorum* became fashionable under oppression by Tiberius, Nero and Domitian.[63] Such a focus on the subject's death is an important parallel for the Passion narratives in the gospels, as well as a major influence on later martyrologies, such as the *Acta Alexandrinorum*.

This brings us neatly to the *Agricola* of Tacitus. The genre of this work has long been in dispute. Various models have been suggested for it, from Hübner's *laudatio* (1866) and Gudeman's comparison with panegyric (1902) to Shuler's 'encomium biography'. Plutarch brings together in his own person the fusion of the Greek and Roman traditions of biography in his *Parallel Lives*, setting a Greek and a Roman side by side for comparison. He writes in Greek, conscious of all the Greek biographical tradition, and yet he had

[60] Joseph Geiger, 'Munatius Rufus and Thrasea Paetus on Cato the Younger', *Athenaeum* 57 (1979), pp. 48–72; quotation from p. 48.
[61] See Momigliano, *Second Thoughts*, pp. 8 and 13.
[62] Geiger, 'Munatius Rufus', p. 71.
[63] Pliny, *Epistles* V.5.3 and VIII.12.4; see Geiger, 'Munatius Rufus', pp. 61–2; for *exitus* and the gospels, see Berger, 'Hellenistische Gattungen im NT', ANRW II.25.2, pp. 1257–9.

travelled to Rome and was widely read there. Twenty-two pairs of *Parallel Lives* survive today, together with four single examples. Suetonius, born *c.* 70 AD, wrote several series of *Lives*, including *On Illustrious Men*, *Rhetoricians* and *Poets*. His most famous work is the *Lives of the Caesars*, dedicated about AD 120. The structure of Suetonius' *Vitae* is interesting for, instead of a strictly chronological approach, he deals with the main material of the reign on a topical basis in an attempt to assess the real character, virtues and vices of the subject; there is a return to chronology for the account of the end of the reign and death. These stories, highly readable and full of anecdotes and scandal, show a form of Graeco-Roman biography which has affinities, not with history or encomium, but with the novel and the entertaining story. Momigliano considers Tacitus, Plutarch and Suetonius to be responsible for keeping biography from becoming merely a tool for imperial propaganda.[64] Again, therefore, we shall return to these authors in Chapter 7.

### 4  The later Empire

Although this final period takes us beyond the time of the gospels, it is worth mentioning some of the features of βίος as it developed. Perhaps the most important second-century writer in this field was the philosophical satirist, Lucian: among his surviving works are various items displaying biographical features, such as the *Encomium of Demosthenes* and pieces entitled simply by the subject's name, such as the *Nigrinus* or *Alexander the False Prophet*. There is also the Δημώνακτος βίος, to be studied in Chapter 7.

Philosophical biography becomes very important in the third century. Diogenes Laertius' compendium of βίοι of philosophers extracted many earlier, yet now lost, writers. Philostratus wrote the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, a wandering philosopher-cum-miracle worker, describing his travels, teaching and great deeds. Since some have compared this with the gospels, we shall return to it in Chapter 7. Further interest was aroused in Pythagoras, with βίοι of him written by both Iamblichus and Porphyry; again, the use of biography in philosophical debate is to be noted. This becomes even more apparent in the pagan–Christian debates of the end of the third and early fourth centuries with Porphyry's *Plotinus* and Eusebius' *Origen*. As Cox has put it, 'biography was

64 Momigliano, *Development*, p. 100.

from its inception a genre that found its home in controversy' with the twin aims of apologetic and polemic, attack and defence, hence its use in the 'holy war' between the pagan schools and Christianity.[65]

Imperial biography also continues, with the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, some thirty accounts of different Caesars, both those who became emperor and also their heirs and usurpers. Following Suetonius, these Lives are topically based with a mix of biography and annals, official documents and anecdotes. The use and interpretation of the *SHA* is problematic because of the multiple authorship and large amounts of fictitious material.[66]

This mixture of the strands of political and philosophical biography continued beyond the Empire itself. In the former category, we have Einhard's *Vita Karoli*, published *c.* AD 835. In this account of Charlemagne, the influence of Suetonius can be seen in the topical arrangement. However, the *Gesta Guillelmi Ducis* by William of Poitiers is the reverse with its chronological structure and few anecdotes; the influence of historiography as the neighbouring genre is stronger here, although this panegyric account of William the Conqueror by his one-time chaplain has more than a hint of encomium too.[67] Philosophical biography seems to have given way to hagiography, or 'sacred biography' as Heffernan prefers to call it, Lives of the saints, 'written by a member of a community of belief' for exemplary purposes of imitation.[68] Many were collections of anecdotes and miracle stories, though others show the influence of Graeco-Roman biography upon them. In the Norman period, William of Malmesbury wrote *Lives* of recent saints such as Dunstan and Wulfstan, as well as a major history of England.[69] The great figure for mediaeval hagiography, St Francis, inspired many writings, including two *Vitae* by Thomas of Celano, the first in 1228 as part of the canonization process and the later version in 1246. These and other pieces like *The Legend of the Three Companions* were officially suppressed in 1266 in favour of the *Life* written by the then Minister General, St Bonaventura.[70]

65 Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity*, p. 135.
66 A.R. Birley, 'The Augustan History', in *Latin Biography*, pp. 113–38.
67 For Einhard, see *Latin Biography*, pp. 96–108; for William, see pp. 139–55.
68 Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (OUP, 1988), pp. 15–16 and 28–30.
69 See D.H. Farmer, 'Two Biographies by William of Malmesbury', in *Latin Biography*, pp. 157–76.
70 See R. Brooke, 'The Lives of St. Francis of Assisi' in *Latin Biography*, pp. 177–98.

### Conclusion

It is perhaps fitting that this survey of a possible genre for the gospels should have begun with the writings of adherents of philosophical schools and ended with the works of members of a religious Order. The first conclusion is therefore obvious: *biography is a type of writing which occurs naturally among groups of people who have formed around a certain charismatic teacher or leader, seeking to follow after him*. If it was true of Socrates, Cato and St Francis that their followers sought to keep their memory alive by writing βίοι and *vitae* of them, then βίος literature is a sensible place to begin a search for the genre of the gospels, written about Jesus by his followers.

Secondly, we have seen that *a major purpose and function of βίοι is in a context of didactic or philosophical polemic and conflict*. The main impetus forming the first true βίοι out of an amalgam of history and encomium was the debate about Socrates, as different schools competed to be seen as his true followers. Similarly, βίοι of Cato were used by both sides in the Civil War which brought the late Roman Republic to a close, and as a method of political and philosophical opposition to the Principate in the early Empire. In the debate between pagans and Christians for the control of the intellectual world of the late Empire, βίοι of saints and philosophers were pressed into service. The propaganda value of βίοι was recognized by politicians from the time of Augustus' *Res Gestae* to the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*. Finally, the debate about the future of the Franciscans after the saint's death was also conducted partly by composing *Vitae* of the master. If the gospels were composed and used in a setting of the early Christian communities struggling to interpret the significance of Jesus for themselves and to resist other interpretations as erroneous, then another possible link with βίοι might be made.

Thirdly, we have followed the development of this genre over the course of a thousand years of Graeco-Roman history and beyond into the Dark Ages and Mediaeval period, across the known world from ancient Persia to Norman England. Thus, *βίος is a genre capable of flexibility, adaptation and growth*, and we should avoid facile and simplistic definitions. Furthermore, βίος nestles among neighbouring genres such as historiography, rhetoric, encomium, moral philosophy, polemic and the novel or story, with some examples tending towards overlap with one or more neighbouring

borders and yet still remaining recognizably within the genre of βίος. Subgenres within βίος literature may be defined both in terms of content (political v. philosophical-literary βίοι) or structure (chronological v. topical) or the influence of neighbouring genres (historical v. encomiastic).

Finally, this survey has demonstrated various possible analogies between the gospels and Graeco-Roman βίοι. Therefore, it is eminently sensible to begin a search for the genre of the gospels within the sphere of βίος, *but such an attempt to consider the gospels as βίοι must always take account of this wider picture of its flexible and developing nature*.

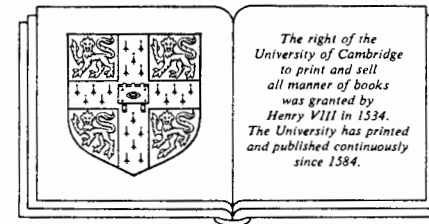# What are the Gospels?

## A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography

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