

APPENDIX: PLUTARCH AND NEPOS

Nepos, it has been argued at some length, was the first ancient author to compose series of biographies of political personages — a distinction that has been ascribed to chance and circumstances rather than to the ingenuity of the biographer. Plutarch, on the other hand, is not only the author of ancient political biographies with whom the genre has ascended its highest literary peak, but also the earliest author of extant biographies of a high literary standard. One writer wrote in Latin, the other in Greek; a century and a half separated the two. Thus, it might be inferred, nothing but the chances of survival link them. Nor are a few references to the one in the writings of the other necessarily of more than passing interest. However, upon reflection it may be discovered that there is more to the relationship than is apparent at first sight.

Plutarch, like other writers, seems to have remained silent during Domitian's reign of terror: at least there is no text extant from the very great output of that prodigious author that can be dated with any certainty to that period¹. Possibly the first major enterprise constituted a sally of sorts into the field of political biography. Some years ago, when comparing the initial dates of the *Lives of the Caesars* of Plutarch and of Suetonius, the first starting with Augustus, the other with Julius Caesar, and analysing the revolution in the attitude towards the latter during the reign of Trajan I proposed the short period of the government of Nerva as the most likely time for the composition of Plutarch's work². Recently, on entirely different lines of reasoning, the same conclusion has been proposed by Sir Ronald Syme³. Be this as it may, even scholars sceptical of a Nervan date will readily acknowledge the apparent priority of the series of Imperial biographies as against the *Parallel Lives*. Not only is the biographical technique in the first series rudimentary, but it has been denied outright the characteristics of true biography. On the other hand, though of necessity a long series like the *Parallel Lives* exhibits some unevenness in its literary standards, no parallel between that unevenness and the supposed order of the biographies, as far as it is discernible, can be established. Yet, no

1 Cf. C.P. Jones, Towards a Chronology of Plutarch's Works, *JRS* 56 (1966), 61 ff.; idem, *Plutarch and Rome*, 135 ff.

2 Zum Bild Julius Caesars in der römischen Kaiserzeit, *Historia* 24 (1975), 444 ff.

3 R. Syme, Biographers of the Caesars, *MH* 37 (1980), 104 ff. (= *Roman Papers* III [Oxford 1984], 1251 ff.).

long period of time separates the two series; the proposal to take the consular year of Sosius Senecio (99), the addressee of the *Lives*, as their starting date⁴ is very attractive indeed. Some thought and preparation, one is inclined to think, were preliminary to the inception of the series. Though the final plan, if such a plan did ever exist, was obviously revised with the progress of the series and, as a result of its success, the outlines must have been fairly clear even before the composition of the first pair of biographies. It is on these preparatory measures that we have to concentrate now. A suggestion recently put forward bears repetition. Once the plan for a parallel series of Greek and Roman generals and statesmen was decided upon, one of the first tasks must have been drawing up at least a preliminary list of suitable persons. With Greeks this would not have been difficult. I have also endeavoured to show that Plutarch started with the recognised heroes of the Classical Age; only with the success of the series there arose the need to expand it with less obvious figures drawn from Hellenistic history. The task of choosing suitable Romans may have required a greater effort. It has been shown, by comparing the Roman *Lives* with the *Moralia*, that Plutarch's acquaintance with Roman history and its heroes did not go much beyond the material assembled in the *Parallel Lives* and contained mostly a collection of some of the best known commonplaces of Roman history. Moreover, Plutarch emphasizes his lack of acquaintance with Latin sources and the fact that he came to read Latin literature late in life for the express purpose of the composition of the *Parallel Lives*. It is only reasonable to assume that a short work containing the essential material and providing the guidelines and list of suitable persons was an important desideratum. Exactly such a work stood at Plutarch's disposal in the form of the book on Roman Generals by Cornelius Nepos — a book with which his acquaintance is attested. Thus, the conclusion that it was Nepos' biographical series that provided Plutarch with a first draft of his list and point of departure of Roman heroes is plausible; the employment of Nepos as a source in the *Lives*, though attested in a few instances, does not seem to have been of much consequence. Plutarch, whose *Lives* are much longer and more full in detail than Nepos', had to employ other sources — in some cases no doubt he reverted to the same sources that were used by Nepos himself. However, it is a different aspect of the relations between the two writers that seems worthy of consideration. It has been often suggested that it was Nepos who provided Plutarch

4 Jones, *JRS* 56 (1966), 70.

with the idea of confronting and comparing Greeks and Romans in a biographical series⁵. We have seen that this was a main feature of Nepos' work. Compared to Plutarch's development of the idea, Nepos' scheme must seem primitive; Plutarch, too, may have had quite a different approach to the comparisons and certainly different political and social aims in mind in employing them. Nevertheless, Nepos' work may have been the catalyst to some of Plutarch's own nascent ideas. Unfortunately, the exact background to the composition of the series cannot be recovered now – perhaps because of the loss of the pair Scipio-Epaminondas, which may have been the first pair in the series and thus could have contained a programmatic introduction⁶. Of necessity, we are reduced to speculation. Here some place must be accorded to Sosius Senecio, the addressee of the *Lives*. Could it be that it was the Roman dedicatee who supplied the author with the idea as well as with the starting point of his work? Another possible link is geographical. It has been pointed out that northern Italians form a predominant group among Plutarch's friends and acquaintances⁷. Arulenus Rusticus, for one, must have guided Plutarch to his main source in the *Life* of the Younger Cato, the Paduan Thræsea Paetus, Arulenus' hero⁸. Another member of the circle, 'the excellent Fundanus', may have been a compatriot of Nepos (in the narrow sense of the word)⁹.

But it is in the structure of the *Parallel Lives* that Nepos' influence may most easily be divined. As stated, Plutarch's *Lives* of the Caesars did not in fact deviate much from the well-attested pattern of the history of a country by means of a biographical series of its rulers. In such a series the biographical element proper is hardly represented. All the author wishes to communicate are the acts of the ruler and the influence of his personality on the character of his rule. It is a far cry from this to the fully developed biographies of the *Parallel Lives*, with their emphasis on the character of the hero, and those of his actions that are most likely to demonstrate it, in preference to the description of actions of objectively historical importance. It is no more than conjecture, or even speculation, to argue that it may have been Nepos who

5 L.E. Lord, The Biographical Interests of Nepos, *CJ* 22 (1926/27), 499: cf. A.J. Gossage, Plutarch, in *Latin Biography* (ed. T.A. Dorey [London 1967]), 75, n. 48.

6 The suggestion of Wilamowitz, *Reden und Vorträge*⁴, II (1926), 260.

7 Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*, 48 ff.

8 Cf. J. Geiger, Munatius Rufus and Thræsea Paetus on Cato the Younger, *Athenaeum* 57 (1979), 64.

9 Cf. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*, 58.

influenced Plutarch not only in the choice of his (Roman) heroes, but also in the determination of the genre. However, it should not be left unsaid that though there is evidence for a number of political biographies in the era between Nepos and Plutarch (such as Thræsea Pætus' *Life* of Cato the Younger duly exploited by Plutarch for his series), there is no sign of the existence of other *series* of political biographies between our two authors¹⁰.

It is not possible to reconstruct the mental processes of a dead author not expressly referred to in his writings. Thus, the inference that Nepos' biographical series (certainly serving as one of Plutarch's sources, probably providing him with a preliminary list of Roman heroes and possibly the idea of confronting Greeks and Romans in a biographical series) influenced the very contents and attitudes of the *Parallel Lives*. Be this as it may, one thing seems to be certain. It has often been remarked that Plutarch's biographies are unique in their standards and achievement and that whatever predecessors may be assigned to them they must have been a far cry from Plutarchean biography. This remains true whether we do or do not assume more or less close forerunners.

10 On Hyginus, cf. above, Ch. III.

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