

Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Humanities

THESES

of the PhD dissertation

CORNELIUS NEPOS – NEGLEGENDUS AUT RECIPIENDUS?

by

FERENC KRISZTIÁN SZABÓ

Consultant: Dr. Zsigmond Ritoók professor emeritus, MHAS

Budapest, 2008.

I. Starting-points and objectives of the dissertation

1. Cornelius Nepos is not among the most investigated authors. The best part of his writing has been lost, and his extant biographies and fragments are judged quite contradictory, mostly unfavourably. This has been caused mainly by the hypercritical approach of the German philologists of the 19th and 20th centuries, who declared the author to a mediocre compiler because of his contradictoriness, carelessness and inferior style. Otherwise the fact is that Nepos is the earliest representative of the existing Latin Biography, and the *Liber de excellentibus ducibus exterarum gentium* is – considering the Greek and the Roman literature as well – the earliest series of political biographies, which can be studied in full. In view of these facts the examination of the author's literary oeuvre can not be neglected, moreover some papers published in the last decades – particularly the one by Joseph Geiger (*Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography*. Stuttgart 1985), which provoked an heated debate – make it possible and necessary to raise new questions of Nepos' source-treatment and place in the history of ancient biography.

Since the existence of political biography in the Hellenistic age can not be proven, Geiger states convincingly that Nepos is the *primus inventor* of the genre. From this follows that his biographies of generals can not be treated as compilations of the (unattested) Hellenistic writings, but have to be declared to the results of original study of primary sources. In spite of (or because of) this the value of the book as a source is quite low. Geiger takes for certain that Nepos' work could be judged more accurately – and maybe more favourably – on the basis of his (lost) biographies of Roman generals. In this statement we agree with him, but we have to consider a mistaken conclusion that Geiger – acquitting Nepos (the innovator and experimenter) of the most part of the charges – oddly does not attach great importance to the book on foreign generals, apart from looking upon it as an epoch-making example of the political biography. Thus the main objective of my dissertation is to prove that the *Liber de excellentibus ducibus exterarum gentium* – especially in the light of Geiger's theses – provides more valuable knowledge for the literary as well as the historical scholarship.

2. The series of the foreign generals was published in the last period of Nepos' literary work, so a short survey of his oeuvre is essential to judge him as a biographer. The first chapter (*Introduction: The judgement of Cornelius Nepos*) is a kind of summary of the previous researches, in which we tried to collect and examine the most typical opinions of Nepos. Among other things we made an attempt to reply to the following questions: what did the ancient audience think of Nepos and how can it be accorded with the – in many aspects – contradictory opinions of the modern scholarship?

From the problems concerning the biographies we concentrated on Nepos' principles of composition in the second chapter (*Cornelius Nepos, the biographer*). The examination of the hints to the content and the number of books of the *De viris illustribus* have led partly to unconvincing, partly to mistaken conclusions, which need to be corrected. The structure of the *Liber de excellentibus ducibus exterarum gentium*

has not been satisfyingly identified yet; it is still unclear, what principle determined the order of the biographies. Thus – being supported by the results of the previous examinations – we attempted to identify the principles of composition, which can be asserted to the whole series.

The hypothesis that Nepos revised the *De viris illustribus* and that this revision affected the book on foreign generals too, makes the matter more complicated: the biographies of Datames, Hamilcar and Hannibal and the chapter *Reges* took part only in the (extant) second edition of the book. Accepting this thesis we have to accept also that Nepos made significant modifications both in the content and in the composition of the original edition. Up to the present it has not been the objective of any examinations, whether the compositions of the two editions differed, although there are numerous signs of the structural change. It is presumable that at the time of enlarging the book Nepos changed the order of the biographies also, which – considering that the structural change was caused by the change of Nepos' conception – makes it necessary to reevaluate the author's role in the history of biography.

Nepos acquired fame as an historian. Although the book on foreign generals is not an historical work (unlike the *Chronica*), it can not be left out of consideration that in the biographies (secondarily) a significant part of the Greek history is demonstrated. Meanwhile Nepos frequently – directly or indirectly – refers to the events of his own days, and interprets them as well, and his statements – which seem to be commonplace remarks at first sight, in reality – testify a coherent historical philosophy. These make it reasonable to treat the book as an historical work, and to reevaluate its historical accuracy (*third chapter: Cornelius Nepos, the historian*).

3. My dissertation is not a comprehensive Nepos-monography; its aim is to demonstrate and judge some questions concerning the (in my opinion) unfairly treated biographer's literary and historical conceptions, and to contribute to the nowadays reviving Nepos-studies by finding some new standpoint.

II. Methods applied in the dissertation

1. Nepos' writings and biographical data are fragmentary, which thing takes part in the fact that the few, short and in some cases hardly interpretable ancient testimonia concerning him are considered differently in the scholarship. In the aspect of judging Nepos the survey of his oeuvre seemed to be essential, besides that we examined what the contemporaries and the successors thought of him and his works. On the basis of the testimonia and Nepos' references concerning the possibilities and the limits of the political biography we made an attempt to uncover objectively the ancient judgement of the author, and summarized his literary and historical aims.

2. The scholarly study of the book on foreign generals started in the modern times, and concentrated on the following question: what and how wrote Nepos? The German philologists emphasized mainly his weaknesses, which led to the fact that he is treated as an unsure, careless compiler with low sense of criticism in the present as well. However there are more papers published in the last decades, which by modulating and refuting the elements of the previous judgement put the author and his

biographies in a more favourable light. The collation of the old and the new approaches makes it possible to take sides in some of the fundamental questions, which is essential for the further examinations.

3. Only the *Liber de excellentibus ducibus exterarum gentium*, the biographies of Cato and Atticus and some fragments survived from the *De viris illustribus*. There are many uncertainty concerning the number of books of the biographical collection and the series of famous men (poets, orators, historians, generals etc.) in its book-pairs. Some of the series can be identified on the basis of Nepos' hints and of the fragments, but more of them can be deduced only through (uncertain) theoretical considerations. From the latters we examined the arguments pro and contra the (lost, but supposed) book-pair on kings (*De regibus*), and tried to settle the dispute by analysing the preface of the chapter *Reges* (unlike previous researchers) in wider context and by bringing it into connection with the content and the structure of the whole book.

4. Since the publication of Friedrich Leo's monography (*Die griechisch-römische Biographie nach ihrer literarischen Form*. Leipzig 1901) it has been widely accepted that Nepos had edited the *De viris illustribus* twice, and that the extant biographies are in their present form from the second (revised) edition. However Leo's thesis is – partly with reason – disputed by some scholars. Because of making his thesis the basis of our examination of the structure of the book we thought it necessary to recite the whole debate, to express our opinion of the viewpoints and to make a synthesis for the further examinations.

5. Most of the arguments contra the second edition of the *De excellentibus ducibus* (at least) are not less disputable than the ones which Leo enumerated pro his hypothesis; thus a new, self-dependent procedure of argumentation is needed to resolve the question. As starting-point we chose to identify the structure of the book on foreign generals, which is – in lack of convincing results – still one of the unanswered questions of the Nepos-studies. We used the results of the previous studies, but made it clear that these have to be modified. On the basis of Nepos' editorial references and of our results from the examination of the *Reges* we concentrated mainly on the provenances of the generals.

6. We took it for sure that Nepos' literary and historical conceptions have to be mirrored in the structure of the book. To prove this we utilized the observations concerning the author's historical philosophy (cf. the papers of László Havas).

7. After identifying the structure of the book we stated that the structure of the first edition – without the new biographies of the second edition – must have been different. Up to now it has not been tried to identify the latter because of many uncertainties; the approach however that the two editions are presented at the same time now makes it possible to find the signs of the structural changes. Some of the principles of the revision can be deduced from the inconsistencies observed in the book, and if more can be found, the thesis of the second edition would be affirmed, moreover the differences of the editions would be more precisely revealed. We chose a starting-point, which is independent from the uncertainties hinted above: it was argued by previous scholars that the cross-references (references forward and backward to the generals) are significant elements of Nepos' editorial work. The systematizing

examination of these – which has not been done yet – led to new results, on the basis of these we attempted to determine the order of the biographies in the first edition.

8. After examining the second edition it became clear that its structure is in close connection with Nepos' literary and historical conception, which makes it sure that the structural change at the time of the second edition was caused by the change of the original conception. The biographies in the second edition are *roughly* in chronological order, which – although it became clear that the principle used for the composition of it was not based on the chronology – as a factual conclusion gave enough basis for raising the hypothesis: in the first edition the biographies were in chronological order. The the biographies complement each other in the aspect of the historical events mentioned in them also, which fact can be treated as an unambiguous sign of the consciousness of the editorial work, thus – in spite of the unreliability of Nepos' chronology – it seemed to be more reasonable to rely upon the events mentioned in the biographies, than upon the generals themselves (as in the previous examinations).

9. On the basis of some observations made by previous scholars it can be argued that the historical conception of Nepos took a significant part in the writing of the book on foreign generals. We thought it to be necessary – as a theoretical preface to the examination of Nepos' principles of source-criticism – to collect, to summarize and to supplement these observations, because these make it possible and necessary to examine the biographical series as an historical work, to treat it as an historical source and to reevaluate its historical accuracy.

10. Unquestionably there are several factual inaccuracies in the *De excellentibus ducibus exterarum gentium*, but in my opinion it gives not enough basis for rejecting those historical data as well, which can be found only in the *vitae* of Nepos. Some examples of this kind of data can be found in a troublesome-looking section of the Life of Themistocles (2, 1-3). Examining this we raised the following question: is it reconcilable with other (known) sources and our present knowledge? On the basis of the hypothesis that Nepos was the first biographer, who tried to coordinate the well-known contradictory sources concerning Themistocles, we may get an inside view of Nepos' principles of source-criticism as well.

III. Main results of the dissertation

1. The ancient testimonia concerning Nepos can not serve to maintain the thesis that the opinion of the contemporaries and successors about him was negative, so it can be stated that the majority of the modern scholars judge these testimonia prejudicially by flashing back their own opinions. The achievement of Nepos has been no doubt faded by those of the other (worthy eminent) authors of the golden age, however it is dubious, if it is a scholarly (and reasonable) procedure to treat him as a second-rate writer on this basis. Instead of this we have to share the opinion of those, who say that the negative judgement of Nepos in the modern scholarship arises from the fact that the majority of his extant works belongs to a less estimated genre: biography.

2. Whereas the arguments against the *communis opinio* – burdened by the preconceptions of the German philologists and their successors – are necessarily hypothetical as well, these stand their ground in the same matter, and have a share in reraising the questions concerning Nepos' role in the history of biography, the source-value and the style of his biographies.

3. The interpretations concerning the *Reges* (XXI) have led partly to uncertain, partly to mistaken conclusions. By reinterpreting the terminology of Nepos it will be argued, that the chapter took place only in the second edition of the Book on foreign generals, and that neither before nor after this book there were no lives of kings included in the *De viris illustribus*. So the *Reges* was neither a résumé nor a recommendation of the unattested Book on foreign kings. Its aim was to make it possible for the readers to get complete (biographical) portraits of the kings too, and for himself to connect the books on the generals and to emphasize his moral and historical philosophy, which was the most important novelty of the new edition.

4. Although the arguments against the second edition of the book on foreign generals threw light upon some weaknesses of Leo's hypothesis, these are not enough convincing to make it entirely unacceptable. Because of this we consider – with lesser modifications – Leo's thesis more probable: Nepos revised and republished the series, and the *Reges* along with the three barbarian biographies have to be treated as later insertions.

5. Our structural examination of the series led to the following result: the book can be divided into three parts (I-IX; X-XIV; XV-XXIII); in each part of the book Nepos set the biographies – on the basis of the provenance of the generals – in a frame structure: in the focus of the book and of each part of it there are Athenian generals (1; 3; 1), who are framed partly by their fellow-citizens (cf. the first part), partly by those from other *poleis*.

6. The thesis of the above sketched composition can be affirmed by additional arguments: this ordering can be treated as a conscious scheme, because it stands its ground in the aspect of the whole series, moreover it is in accordance with the content concerns of the book (which can not be said of the previous attempts wholly) as well as with the previous observations concerning Nepos' philosophy of history. Besides these the recognition of this structure makes clearer Nepos' historical conception: in the whole book (and in each part of it) Athens is in the focus, so it can be stated that Nepos – in the 'frames' of the biographies of generals reports the 'life of Athens' too; her 'life' can be traced from rise to becoming unimportant in the consciously chosen, characterized and placed *vitae* of the Athenian generals. So Nepos illustrates the nature of history as an organism with the example of Athens, and this is the *polis* through the fortune of which we can understand the causes and consequences of the *translatio imperii*.

7. Up to the present it has not been supposed that the moral cross-references between the biographies of generals can be used not only for cognition of Nepos' methods of character-drawing, but for revealing his principles of composition too. From the thesis that the majority of Nepos' audience became acquainted with the generals of the book in the order of place (i. e. reading) of their biographies follows the

consequence, that Nepos was allowed to compare a character of a general only to the one's staying before in the order. Because it is not so in all cases, this thesis – supplemented and confirmed by the results of the examination of all (i. e. not only moral) cross-references – lets it possible to change the place of some biographies in the second edition. Thus the inconsistencies observed in the system of cross-references may have been caused by the change in the order of biographies: this assumption on the one hand confirms the revision of the book independently from the previous hypotheses, on the other hand makes it acceptable that Nepos not only enlarged the original series, but altered its structure also.

8. The – undoubtedly hypothetical – order resulted from the examination of the the cross-references can be affirmed by the results of an other examination concerning Nepos' chronological principles, and it can be stated that the order of biographies in the first edition was determined essentially by the chronology. The bases of this chronological order were the deeds connected to the *akmai* of the generals, but Nepos asserted his literary aims too, wanting his book to be followable in the aspect of the names and the deeds of the generals as well. The change in the order of biographies – taking in account that it remained *roughly* chronological in the second edition – was just as big as it was necessary for the new concept of the new edition.

9. According to recent researches Nepos relied on historical writings, which surely increases the value of the series as an historical source. Mainly because – if he is the inventor of political biography – he himself had to search for, to treat, to evaluate and to match the – frequently hardly interpretable and contradictory – sources. Thus it can be assumed that the historical mistakes of Nepos – at least in some cases – are not caused by the careless treating of the sources, but by the contradictory historical tradition, namely by the difficulties of orientation in it (i. e. source-criticism).

10. The authenticity of the Corcyrean war (Nepos, *Them.* 2, 1-3) can not be refuted by any of the extant sources, and it can be assumed that in this war – datable to the late 490's – Themistocles was one of the *strategoï*. Otherwise the examined biography improves our knowledge concerning the history of Greece.

11. The results of my dissertation accord with the recent studies, which urge the more reasonable estimation of the author. The structural change of the book on generals, as well as the change of literary and historical conception of Nepos standing in its background make the role of Nepos in the history of biography more significant. His editorial and source-treating principles are noticeably fundamented on well considered and consequently applied theories, which on the one hand affirm that Nepos was not a servile compiler, on the other hand make it necessary to study his biographies as historical sources deeper than before.

IV. Publications in the theme of the dissertation

1. Cornelius Nepos királyéletrajzai? (Megjegyzések a *Reges* fejezethez)
Antik Tanulmányok LI (2007) 217-237.
2. *S. Anselm*: Struktur und Transparenz. Eine literaturwissenschaftliche Analyse der Feldherrnviten des Cornelius Nepos. Stuttgart 2004. (review)
Antik Tanulmányok LII (2008) s. a.
3. Themistoklés *praetor*-sága és a korkyrai háború (Nepos *Them.* 2, 1-3)
Antik Tanulmányok (probable date of publication: 2009).