

Twenty-five years ago Joseph Geiger argued that Nepos invented the genre of political biography. The most extensive response to this thesis in print (Tuplin 2000) is somewhat supportive but ultimately ambivalent in its conclusions, and a consensus now seems to have emerged that rejects Geiger's thesis (Moles 1989; Scardigli 1995: 17-8; Duff 1999: 7, 17-22; Stadter 2007: 528-31; Pryzwansky 2009: 101-2). This paper will acknowledge the arguments of Geiger's critics but ultimately reassert a more restricted version of his claim of Nepotian priority: the invention of serial political biography.

Criticism of Geiger's thesis clusters around three points. First, Nepos nowhere makes an explicit claim to novelty. Geiger argues that *Pref.* 1 and *Pel.* 1.1 imply such a claim, but his critics rightly find them inconclusive. Second, so much of Hellenistic biography is lost that it is difficult to make any conclusive claims about the existence of political biography in that period. Tuplin, however, independently confirms Geiger's argument that our fragmentary evidence for Hellenistic biography does not reveal any evidence for biography of the type of Nepos' *On Foreign Generals*. Third, and most significant, critics disapprove of Geiger's claims for clear generic boundaries between political biography, encomium, and the historical monograph. How, for example, are we to classify Polybius' lost *Philopoemen* (Momigliano 1971: 82-4)?

I would add a fourth problem: what were Nepos' attested longer works (in at least one book) on Cato the Elder (*Cato* 3.5) and Cicero (Gellius 15.28.1)? At least the longer work on Cato predates the extant collection of generals: did it mark Nepos' invention of political biography? Geiger's reticence about this question (1985: 78-84) leads to a weaker version of his thesis (a version acknowledged without consent at Geiger 2008: 41). Given that Geiger defines Hellenistic biography as inherently serial (1985: 18-9, 36, 57), I would refine his thesis to argue that Nepos was the first to treat political men in the serial format already developed for the presentation of philosophical and literary figures. This more limited claim does not strain our evidence for Hellenistic biography, nor does it require strict generic classifications of earlier, yet independent works about individuals.

Understanding Nepos' innovation to be the creation of a serial format for the biographies of political men also clarifies our understanding of his achievement in two major ways. First, Steidle 1963 and Moles 1989 argue that Nepos drew from Greek biographical precedents, while Bradley 1991 has shown that Nepos used major Greek historians (e.g., Ephorus). The modified version of Geiger's thesis advocated here explains *why* Nepos turned to longer historical works: because briefer, serial compilations of political biography did not yet exist. Second, while Dionisotti 1988 demonstrated that Nepos' biographies have political point, it is Nepos' invention of serial political biography that provides the comparative framework within which to evaluate the political virtues of generalship overall, as well as of individual statesmen, thereby affirming his significance as a predecessor to Plutarch. In its more circumscribed form, therefore, Geiger's thesis deserves to be endorsed, and Nepos deserves to be recognized for being the first in antiquity to perceive the possibilities in combining – *on a serial scale* – the ethical perspective of biography with the political perspective of history.