

NICOLAUS OF DAMASCUS:  
*THE LIFE OF AUGUSTUS AND*  
*THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

Nicolaus of Damascus, the chief minister of Herod the Great, was an exact contemporary of the first Roman emperor Augustus; he spent considerable time in Roman society and knew Augustus. The extensive remains of his *Bios Kaisaros* contain the earliest and most detailed account of the conspiracy against Julius Caesar and his assassination. The *Bios* also presents the most extensive account of the boyhood and early development of Augustus. This edition presents the Greek text and translation of the *Bios* and Nicolaus' autobiography, along with a historical and historiographical commentary. The Introduction situates the text in relation to the considerable evidence for the life and career of Nicolaus preserved in the works of Josephus, addresses the problem of its date of composition, analyses the language and narrative technique of Nicolaus and discusses the *Bios* in relation to the evidence for Greek biographical encomium.

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Nicolaus of Damascus , Edited and translated by Mark Toher

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AND  
*THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION  
TRANSLATIONS AND  
HISTORICAL COMMENTARY

BY  
MARK TOHER



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## PREFACE

In the tenth century AD the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus conceived a peculiar project, to preserve all historical knowledge by reducing it to categorized excerpts from the classical historians. Among the remains of this prodigious undertaking are the excerpts of a biographical work dealing with the early life of Augustus by a friend of the Princeps, Nicolaus of Damascus. These excerpts deal with crucial events in the last decades of the Roman Republic and provide a singular account of the most notorious event in Roman history. For nearly a century the edition of the fragments of Nicolaus by Jacoby in his *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* has endured as the authoritative text and analysis of the *Bios Kaisaros* – and with good reason, given that scholar's *akribeia* and comprehensive knowledge of Greek historiography. And although there have been five editions of the *Bios* in four languages since Jacoby, all have generally followed him in their Greek texts, dating and basic understanding of the nature of the work. Although I differ with Jacoby on the fundamental questions of the date of the *Bios* and the significance of how it relates to the autobiography of Augustus, long acquaintance with just one of the fragmentary authors in Jacoby's collection has only enhanced my admiration and wonder for that indispensable work of scholarship. Nevertheless, the analysis here is based on the ample evidence for the career of Nicolaus found in the fragments of his autobiography and in the works of Josephus to reconstruct when and why Nicolaus undertook his work on Augustus. A significant consideration throughout is the *Bios* as a literary artifact in relation to its historiographical context. This is not an issue Jacoby neglected, but in general work on the *Bios* has tended to treat it as a text to be mined for its "sources" (especially in the scholarship before Jacoby's edition) or used to confirm or contradict facts of Roman history found in other ancient sources.

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The Greek text of Nicolaus has had the benefit of excellent editors. My text is based on an examination of photocopies of the two codices of the *Bios*, but it differs very little from the texts of de Boor and Büttner-Wobst found in the editio princeps of Constantine's encyclopedia and that of Jacoby. The editors of the editio princeps were concerned with establishing what the excerptors transmitted, while Jacoby's emendations and supplements sometimes seem to attempt to resurrect the text of Nicolaus. Jacoby was a brilliant (if sometimes intrusive) editor, but the text here will occasionally tend to the more conservative readings of de Boor and Büttner-Wobst.

The English translation has no pretense to art or elegance. The Greek style of the *Bios* varies from impressively dramatic to obscure and threadbare. In my translation I have tried to make obscure or difficult passages intelligible for the Greekless reader while making it evident how I have addressed the problems they present for those spending more time on the left-hand page. My first priority in the commentary has been to situate and analyze the evidence of the *Bios* in relation to the wider context of other ancient sources. I have tried to cite the relevant bibliography of scholars but am under no illusion that my citation is comprehensive for the range of topics and persons dealt with in the *Bios*. Nevertheless, I hope it will be sufficient to provide the reader with easy access to wider discussion of particular issues.

What to call Augustus in his first year of public life is a problem that goes back to April of 44 BC. My use of the name Octavian throughout the commentary will annoy some, especially since I avoid its use in my translation of the *Bios*. But the name Caesar, which the Dictator's heir adopted within weeks after the Ides, would only cause confusion in the commentary, and qualified nomenclature like "young Caesar" that I use occasionally in the translation would become irksome by repetition. The name "Octavianus" is the logical alternative, but its derogatory use in Augustus' early career by his opponents, and in an iconic account of Augustus' invention of

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the Principate, would seem to suggest an attitude toward the teenager that I do not share.

A work long in its composition incurs many debts. Grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Loeb Library Classical Foundation, the American School of Classical Studies at Athens and All Souls College, Oxford afforded uninterrupted time (most valuable of resources) and excellent libraries for work. I am deeply grateful to them all, and to Fergus Millar, Christopher Pelling and Kurt Raaflaub (a triumvirate of kindness and wisdom) for their support of my work on the commentary. For nearly thirty-five years, Union College has provided me resources and funding for research that is extraordinary by the standards of a small liberal arts college. In a similar way, colleagues past and present in the Department of Classics, the late Christie Sorum, John Marincola, Scott Scullion, Hans-Friedrich Mueller, Stacie Raucci and Tommaso Gazzarri have provided a truly collegial atmosphere. Mrs. Marianne Snowden came into the Department as the “admin” just four months after I arrived at Union. Her unfailing support and constant efficiency were integral to both my teaching and research for all those years. A commentary is a dreary thing to read and so I owe a significant debt to Christopher Pelling (again) for reading through a draft of the whole commentary, and to John Ramsey, who read a later draft of the majority of the commentary. I have benefited by their queries, observations and corrections. I am grateful also to Miriam Griffin, Robert Morstein-Marx and Barry Strauss, each of whom provided helpful comments on specific points. However, the standard disclaimer regarding errors or oversights applies: they are all mine.

The dedication is to my wife, Barbara Burek, for her genial tolerance of the topic, and for her constant love and support.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The citation of “F” followed by a numeral in the introduction and commentary refers to a fragment in Jacoby’s edition of a work of N. other than the *Bios*, while “T” followed by a numeral refers to the testimonia for N. in the same edition. The citation *IB* followed by a numeral refers to the excerpts of N.’s autobiography in this edition. All cross-references to the text of the *Bios* are cited by Jacoby’s section (§) numbers, which have been retained in this edition.

In the text of *The Life of Augustus*, parenthetical citations of “J” and “M” followed by a numeral refer to the fragment and chapter numbers of the Greek text in the editions of Jacoby and Müller.

I have followed the practice in the editio princeps of Nicolaus by Büttner-Wobst and de Boor and use an asterisk to indicate that, due to the excerptor, a word has fallen out of the text, two asterisks where two or more words have been lost and three asterisks to indicate that the text was discontinued by the excerptor in mid-sentence. Wording in smaller type indicates a comment by the excerptor himself.