Introduction

All who acquired the ability to provide themselves the most reliable confidence in their neighbors thereby lived together most pleasantly, most secure in mutual trust, and by forming the closest affiliation they never mourned in sorrow over anyone's untimely demise. (*Lives* 10.154: Epicurus, *Key Doctrine* 40)

So ends the volume we call *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, sketching a beatific vision of peace and personal tranquility blessed with easy prosperity and pervasive social harmony. It is a vision of human happiness – of what the volume's author and its philosophers call eudaimonia – as the "end" or ultimate goal and fulfillment of our natural endowments and aspirations which most of the figures whose lives here recounted would embrace, at least so far as outlined. Certainly they disagreed on how to characterize it more fully, how to cultivate or achieve it for oneself and for others, how to conduct ourselves in its pursuit or promotion, how even to approach such questions, and much else besides. Yet the passage provides a fitting close to the volume, not only for its stirring prospect of peace achieved through philosophy, but as an exceptional, and exceptionally potent example of convergence among a tribe so famously quarrelsome as ancient philosophers: not only ending with the single topic that nearly all agreed was the most important of all, given its bearing on how we conduct our entire lives, but even outlining a position that could attract the widest assent. In fact, even the Skeptics in his pages who on principle withheld assent universally propound a remarkably similar vision, even if only provisionally as reports of how things "appear" to them after sustained consideration so far.

In concluding his work so, our author follows the lead of Epicurus, whose catechism of *Key Doctrines* he grants the distinct honor of transcribing in entirety. Nor is the booklet only given the last word; in pronouncing it the "colophon" or capstone to his own work (*Lives* 10.138), our author fueled modern suspicions that, despite a notable absence of partisanship elsewhere in the *Lives*, he might have harbored a quiet preference for Epicureanism. Be that as it may, and there will be more to say as we proceed, his choice points to a common complaint. For all the wealth of material packed into the *Lives*, its unparalleled trove of biography, bibliography, documents and documentation, repartee, poetry, prosopography, even philosophy, at turns fascinating, funny, illuminating, and frustrating – for all its riches, this compendium of

learned lore about so many "eminent philosophers" of classical antiquity is patently a patchwork quilt, stitched together from legions of earlier writers, not all of them reliable. Its author accordingly has long been scolded for profligate and indiscriminate borrowing, even counted philosophically bankrupt by some, devoid of independent thought or critical judgment. His treasury would then be only a chance survival, the simple-minded stitching of secondhand scraps saved only by relegation to some musty Attic. Rather more likely, it outlasted its forerunners, on so many of which it drew, by virtue of some distinctive strengths, whether in design or execution, scope or orientation, or the very selectivity of its threads and scraps.

1. THE AUTHOR: DIOGENES LAERTIUS

The *Lives* appears not to have survived on the strength of its author's name. Ironically for a biographer, especially one who records so much about so many other lives, we have no ancient reports at all about his own, not even from his own hand. His very name, which he apparently chose not to inscribe anywhere among the hundreds of others he records in his pages, comes to us only via some scattered references to his writings centuries later, and then in the Byzantine manuscripts of the *Lives* from the 1100s that preserve our earliest copies of the work. Today we call him Diogenes Laertius, which is probably accurate. The earliest evidence, however, is nearly unanimous in calling him "Laertius Diogenes"; only rarely is he "Diogenes Laertius" and once simply "Diogenes."[1] Is the discrepancy significant? For the Roman élite, who had complex naming conventions and followed them strictly to display their status and connections, it would be. For a Greek, however, the norm always remained a single given name, followed by the father's name on occasion, but typically, and especially later in the wider and more mobile world opened up by Alexander's conquests, a toponym specifying his homeland, or sometimes an adopted home. Reversing the two, though far from common in antiquity, does occur. Philostratus of Lemnos (fl. 220 CE), probably a contemporary and author of a complementary collection of *Lives of Sophists* (c. 240), has his own names reversed – "Lemnius

[1] "Laertius Diogenes" twenty times: sixteen of seventeen in the original hands of three primary manuscripts, once each in Photius (*Bibliotheca*, Codex 161), the *Palatine Anthology* (7.98), and Stephanus of Byzantium (*Ethnica* 4.133: p. 239). "Diogenes Laertius" three times: once each in one of the manuscripts, *Palatine Anthology* (7.89), and Stephanus (p. 695), where we also find "Diogenes" once (5.80: p. 270). Possibly also "Laitos" in Tatian, *Oration to the Greeks* 37, apparently a later interpolation; cf. Jouanna (2009) 390.

Philostratus" – by a later biographer, the Neoplatonist Eunapius of Sardis, in the prologue to his own collection of *Lives of Philosophers and Sophists* (c. 395). A Diogenes surnamed Laertius either way, then, comes to much the same.

Our author's origins might seem settled then. The *Lives* are in Greek, so it is only natural to assume that was our author's native tongue. By his time, however, it had long since become the *lingua franca* – the "shared tongue" of *koinê* Greek – for much of the Roman empire, and even many Italian Romans were fluent. A case in point is the emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE), in whose reign our author was most likely born (as we shall soon see): the chapbook he composed "For Himself", as our manuscripts call it, better known today as his *Meditations*, is entirely in Greek. Closer to Diogenes in date, and in other regards too, is Claudius Aelianus (c. 165/70–c. 230/5), commonly called Aelian, a native Italian from a suburb of Rome itself, and a renowned stylist in his adopted language, proclaimed "honey-tongued" for his fluency, who produced an album of historical vignettes, called the *Historical Miscellany*, that intersects with the *Lives* repeatedly. Another intriguing case turns up in Diogenes' own *Lives*, a physician and philosopher we know as Sextus Empiricus, whose voluminous critiques of "dogmatist" claims and arguments – all in fluent Greek again – are a fountainhead of modern skepticism. Yet his recorded name is patently Roman again, at least his *praenomen* or personal name "Sextus"; and in his case we have no other given name at all, only a "sectarian" or partisan label for his "Empiricist" approach to medicine.

We might wonder then whether Laertius reflects a Roman name comparable to any of these. The answer is deafening silence. As a personal name like "Sextus" or "Claudius" it is simply not attested, which roundly confirms the prevailing assumptions that our author's given name was "Diogenes" and his civil status or ethnicity Greek. "Laertius" might still be an acquired Roman family name, like "Aelianus": his fellow biographer Lucius Flavius Philostratus and before him the famous author of "parallel lives", Lucius Mestrius Plutarch (c. 45–c.125), illustrate how Greek intellectuals in the Imperial age could win not only citizenship and patronage from eminent Romans but *nominal* admission into consular families of the first rank. It is entirely plausible that Diogenes achieved similar success with a family of Laertii and received their name to augment his own as Laertius Diogenes, along with a *praenomen*, perhaps another Lucius or Sextus. Yet that remains pure speculation, as no trace of any such family has yet turned up. Moreover, if he acquired Roman citizenship before 212 when it was extended throughout the empire, we should expect him to be named "Aurelius" or "Aurelianus" instead, after the imperial family.

Which brings us back to the leading Greek alternative. If "Diogenes" was in fact our author's given name, and his other name also Greek, then the likeliest explanation is that "Laertius" is a place-name of some sort. Is there anything more to be said for that hypothesis? Here again the jury remained out until recently. The chief source of doubt was a paucity of literary evidence for the name, which is attested in mainly two contexts, and only rarely in either. One is simply as a metrical variant for "Laertes," the father of Homeric Odysseus, in classical Attic drama. The other is the set of mostly medieval references to our author already noted. Obviously neither offers any support for the present proposal. Only a single literary text records a topical use of the name. The learned Stephanus of Byzantium, in a vast lexicon of toponyms and associated ethnonyms compiled during Justinian's reign (527–565), lists "Laertius" as the proper term for natives of a site he calls Laertes – exactly the same as Odysseus' father – and characterizes it as "a small territory in Cilicia" (*Ethnica* 11.15). Although he cites two reputable authorities for the place, the accuracy of his report long remained in question. Doubts again turned mainly on the dearth of literary evidence. Yet one of the works cited by Stephanus survives, and it identifies the site's location exactly, at least by ancient standards: a hilltop fortress with good harbor, says the polymath Strabo (c. 60 BCE–c. 25 CE) in his comprehensive *Geography* (14.5.3), just west of the mouth of the Selinous River on the Cilician coast between Korakesion (modern Alanya) to the northwest and Cape Anemurium ("Tailwind") to the southeast, on the southern seaboard of modern Turkey just "350 stades" from Cyprus: about 40 miles, and on the mark.

The accuracy of the rest of Strabo's report has been amply confirmed by modern surveys in the region from the 1960s, which yielded fresh material evidence in the form of both coins and inscriptions that provide conclusive confirmation for the toponym recorded by Stephanus. Our author's original name, as an array of evidence assembled by Olivier Masson (1995) shows beyond reasonable doubt, was Diogenes Laertius. His first name is among the more common in Greek antiquity, the other unparalleled in literary sources. Yet the pairing follows standard Greek practice evident on nearly every page of his *Lives*. As Socrates was from Athens, one Zeno from Elea in Italy (*Lives* 9.25) and another from Citium on Cyprus (7.1), so the Cynic Diogenes was from Sinope on the north shores of Asia Minor (6.20) and our author from Laertes on the southern shores in the region known as Cilicia. The Cynic was accordingly called "Sinopeus" or Sinopean to distinguish him from his many homonyms – his entry here in the *Lives* lists only four others (6.81) but they were countless – and our author correspondingly Laertius. Or rather, as English idiom generally prefers names over adjectives

for towns, favoring "Diogenes of Sinope" for example, so we would ordinarily call our author Diogenes of Laertes. Either way, received tradition stands confirmed: the author of the *Lives* was a Laertian, a man from Laertes named Diogenes.

Our path, though circuitous, has introduced several factors that form the background to both our author's life and his *Lives*. Fundamental are the mobility and prestige that Greek intellectuals enjoyed in the Imperial era, which must have shaped his own education, his access to the materials required for his work along with its design and articulation, and finally its reception, both its first audiences and its path to survival. For, hazy and uncertain though the boundaries of his own lifetime are likely forever to remain, his adult years probably fell either largely or entirely within a period that is fairly considered, if not a highwater mark in human civilization as Gibbon might have it (*Decline and Fall* 1.3.2), then a period of relative peace and prosperity around the Mediterranean basin. That is the period inaugurated when Septimius Severus (145–211), a senator from north Africa, was proclaimed emperor in 193, barely a dozen years after the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 that marks the end of Gibbon's golden age, and only months after the assassination of his son Commodus – a period that ended abruptly with the murder of Severus Alexander, grandson to his wife's sister, in 235.

The Severan Age, as the intervening four decades are sometimes called, was one of immense erudition and intellectual ferment that witnessed literary production on a massive scale.[2] Besides most of Galen's vast corpus in medicine and philosophy (129–c. 215), by far the largest surviving body of work by any one author, the period of relative calm spawned a veritable industry of compilation in all areas of learning. The contributions of Philostratus (over twelve books), Sextus (twenty or more books), and Aelian (over thirty books), hefty enough as they are, fall short of the vast "banquet" of learning in fifteen books by Athenaeus of Alexandria (fl. 200) and are dwarfed by the mammoth history of Rome in eighty books by L. Cassius Dio of Nicea (c. 164–c. 230) and still more massive compendia of Roman law in over 200 books by Domitius Ulpian of Tyre (d. 223). Philosophical scholarship was also at high tide, with Alexander of Aphrodisias, Titus Aurelius Alexander officially, appointed to the imperial chair in Aristotelian philosophy in Athens under the first Severus and producing his own enormous corpus of Aristotelian commentaries (covering all the treatises on logic and most of those on physics) and studies (another eight titles) that would duly win him the title of eponymous "Exegete."

[2] Articles in Swain et al. (2007) examine cultural aspects of the period; see especially Trapp (2007) and Whitmarsh (2007).

Such was the ecumenical culture in which Diogenes lived and wrote. That much is clear from his familiarity with one of these writers, Sextus Empiricus, whose work he evidently knew (cf. 9.87) and praises highly (9.116). The *Lives* also share many points of information with Aelian and Athenaeus recorded nowhere else. On the other hand, the *Lives* show no awareness either of Alexander's enterprise or of the previous generations of Aristotelians: no sign even of prominent second-century figures like Aspasius, Adrastus, Sosigenes, or Herminus.[3] That and similar gaps in coverage are commonly flagged as chronological indicators. A neglect of major developments in Platonism on one hand, and of Christianity's growing impact on intellectual life on the other, make it very likely that the *Lives* were finished before 250 CE, by which time the Platonist Plotinus (205–269/70) was settled in Rome, and Origen of Alexandria (184/5–254/5) reaching the end of his prolific career. Yet both trends had already gained prominence considerably earlier, and given Sextus' presence, their absence may have less chronological significance than usually supposed. It would still be odd for Diogenes to ignore, unless his agenda so demanded, leading second-century Platonists like Atticus, Albinus, and Taurus, or Origen's own Christian teachers, either the prominent Titus Flavius Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215), or the bishop Hippolytus (c. 170–235), active in Rome by the 210s and author of a critique of "heretical" stances that intersects with the *Lives* significantly.[4] The absence of these and similar figures from the *Lives*, then, is more reasonably attributed to Diogenes' own conception of the scope and purpose of his work. Before we pursue that lead, however, a review of some other evidence for his date will supply further useful background to the *Lives*.

Unlike many writers of the era, who often attach a dedication or other explicit statement indicating the date or occasion for their writing, Diogenes tells us almost nothing. Our best clue occurs late in the work, where Sextus Empiricus appears together with an otherwise unknown student of his at the end of a chronological list of Pyrrhonists that closes Book 9. As the latest identified figure named in the *Lives*, Sextus provides a *terminus post quem* for the *Lives*, which must have been written after Sextus finished the works Diogenes cites (apparently in different form than we know them; cf. 9.87). But his mention of Sextus' student hardly justifies pushing Diogenes' date a generation or more

[3] For the Peripatetics, see the chapter by R. Sharples in Gerson (2010); and for other philosophers named here, see Goulet (1989–2018).

[4] But see 9.68 for what might be a reference to the Platonist Numenius (fl. 150), for whom see Athanassiadi (2018); for Clement, see the chapter by C. Osborne in Gerson (2010).

later, not in a world of easy trade and travel when both books and their readers, both teachers and students, and especially the latter, moved quickly around the Mediterranean, whether to or from Italy or among the eastern provinces in Greece, Egypt, and Asia. A likelier hypothesis is that Diogenes was more or less a contemporary of Sextus. How much their lifespans overlapped is beyond telling today, partly because Sextus' own dates are also shrouded in uncertainty. Recent assessments of the evidence, however, favor assigning his activity to the earlier half of the Severan Age in the decades on either side of 200 CE.[5] If that is about right, then Sextus was a younger contemporary of Galen, probably older than Aelian, and writing anywhere between 180 and 220. As his contemporary in turn, Diogenes then falls comfortably within the Severan Age: about the same age as Aelian and Hippolytus and producing his *Lives* around 210 or 220, earlier or later according to the dating of Sextus and the time gap between his writings and the *Lives*, which as far as we know could be very narrow.

Two other possible clues deserve consideration. Both appear in related contexts near the end of Book 9, both involve ordinary prepositional phrases, and both are tenuous in the extreme. One is a unique reference to a scholar named Apollonides of Nicea in 9.109, whom Diogenes calls "one of ours" (ὁ παρ' ἡμῶν) before citing a work he dedicated to the emperor Tiberius (14–37 CE). Unfortunately, the phrase can be understood in more than one way. Taken literally it would mean "from our place or region"; but Nicea, in the province of Bithynia, lies at the opposite corner of Asia Minor from Cilicia in the southeast. Or it could invoke family ties, as "from our family or clan"; but it seems self-defeating to leave such a connection so obscure. Or by extension, the phrase could claim some other shared interest or allegiance, which some have been tempted to identify as Pyrrhonian skepticism. Other details in the *Lives* might also be seen as signs of the same predilection: an early clarification about the status of Pyrrhonism as a philosophical "stance" (1.20); an evident facility and delight in frequently quoting the Pyrrhonian Timon's "lampoons" (cf. 9.111–12); an exceptionally thorough treatment of Pyrrhonian arguments (9.70–108); and the only list of adherents that extends all the way to his own era (9.115–16). Yet the only indication that Apollonides himself was a Pyrrhonian is that he devoted a study to Timon's poem, which hardly establishes allegiance: so did the Peripatetic Sotion (cf. F1). Moreover, if the phrase does have partisan force, then its bearing on Diogenes' dates depends entirely on

[5] E. Spinelli's entry on Sextus (S75) in Goulet (1989–2018) reviews the question and finds less significance in his absence from Galen's corpus than Jouanna (2009) does; cf. House (1980).

our initial clue; for then his Pyrrhonian interests would be the likely rationale for his paying special attention to Sextus and other recent figures, who would be most familiar to fellow partisans. In any case, it is worth emphasizing that even if Diogenes did harbor such sympathies, they did not prevent him from producing a remarkably balanced treatment of other figures and traditions in his work as a whole.

The other potential clue is still more tenuous. Sextus' student appears in our text as "Saturninus the Kythênas." The first name is again Roman, but the second, which appears nowhere else, is inscrutable. Statistically, it is likeliest to be either a place-name or personal epithet like countless others that pepper the *Lives*. But the young Nietzsche proposed emending it to read "in our time" (καθ' ἡμᾶς), which would make Saturninus and Diogenes contemporaries explicitly. The proposal, though plausible, cannot count as evidence. For our author's adult life, then, we are left with a wide window spanning the Severan Age, from the 190s to the 230s, and at forty years or so, a typical period of activity for the writers we have considered. It remains to ask if anything further can be said about where he wrote. Or is it already straining credibility to imagine anyone from a provincial outpost in Cilicia ever accomplishing what our author did, even if as poorly as some critics would have it?

Laertes, though apparently never more than a modest town, was not inconsequential. When Marcus Aurelius died in 180 CE, it had been issuing coins with imperial sanction for most of the century, at least since Trajan, and would continue doing so for at least another 70 or 80 years, long before and after Diogenes' lifetime.[6] Though mentioned only twice in surviving literature, its history stretched back centuries, before its first recorded appearance in a lost work by Alexander "Polyhistor" (F123), a noted polymath writing in the mid-first century BCE and cited repeatedly as an authority in the *Lives*. How the site acquired its name is not recorded, but an eponymous founder is a plausible guess. In any case, it distinctly smacks of local pride for a family there to name their son Diogenes. For as everyone raised on Homer would have recognized, the resulting pair of names produces an extraordinary evocation of the most versatile figure in Greek literature. Introduced as "man of many turns" (1.1), the eponymous hero of Homer's *Odyssey* aptly receives numerous epithets – and several pseudonyms – over the course of the epic, and one formulaic title especially prominently: "Zeus-born son of Laertes," or transliterated, *Diogenes Laertiades* (all of 22 times). The correspondence is too close to be coincidental, and it casts Diogenes in the first instance as another Odysseus, but also as a leading son of his fatherland, with the epic patronym (*-ades*) construed

[6] Masson (1995).

instead as a toponym.[7] Viewed from his father's perspective, the choice of name proclaims pride in family and land alike. So striking is the resonance that it would be surprising if the name was not a longstanding local tradition, perhaps reserved for the town's leading families. At the very least, we can be confident that Diogenes was raised in a cultivated family, and that he followed the lead of the shrewd hero his twin names evoke, setting forth on his own travels to "see the towns and learn the minds of many men" (*Odyssey* 1.3) – the fruits of which we can now read in his *Lives*.

However limited its own cultural resources might have been, Laertes afforded ready access to any number of opportunities near and far. A natural first stop was Tarsus, a short voyage east along the Cilician coast past Cape Anemurium. A major center for both rhetoric and philosophy already in Strabo's day (14.5.13–15), when he ranked it the greatest center of all, ahead of both Athens and Alexandria, Tarsus was still a thriving hub two centuries later. So Diogenes himself confirms by way of the same list of Pyrrhonians that provides our best clue to his date. Although Sextus and his student Saturninus are left homeless (unless the mysterious "Kythênas" conceals a place-name), Sextus' teacher is from Tarsus, and fully identified with a patronymic: Herodotus son of Arieus (9.116). It is tempting to imagine Diogenes meeting all three there as a young man studying philosophy: possible but idle speculation. Weighing somewhat against that is the geographic distribution of the preceding teachers in the list: two from Laodicea and a third from Nicomedia. Their exclusively Asian origins are suggestive, but mainly of their mobility as physicians, philosophers, and intellectuals generally, not of where anyone actually studied or taught. A more apt parallel might be the Stoic Chrysippus from Soloi, where Strabo says his father had migrated from nearby Tarsus (14.5.8; cf. *Lives* 7.179), and a town whose origins Diogenes bothers to recount in his life of Solon (1.51). For that fellow native son of coastal Cilicia to become the preeminent Stoic of his time, and more than four centuries earlier, should put to rest any residual doubts about Diogenes' own opportunities, even without any secure evidence for where or with whom he studied.

Any number of cities could have served Diogenes well. Leading magnets for philosophy at the time included Alexandria, Athens, and Rome, though his silence about developments in the first two favors caution there. Rome excites interest, thanks in part to affinities the *Lives* show to work by others active there in the Severan period, notably some

[7] The Homeric formula has also been proposed as the basis for 'Laertius' as merely a nickname; cf. Masson (1995). Its topographical resonance gives the connection real point.

previously named above. What has most fanned speculation, however, is a pair of brief remarks Diogenes addresses to an unnamed woman, identified only by his use of gendered words to describe her. These, the only personal addresses in the entire volume, appear at corresponding points in his treatment of two leading figures: the first midway in Book 3 as Diogenes finishes his life of Plato and turns to his writings and then teachings (3.47); the other in Book 10 after his account of the life and writings of Epicurus as he turns to his teachings (10.29). The first portrays his addressee as especially interested in Plato, and no mere novice, perhaps more in flattery than candor. The second directs its praise at Epicurus, though not without complimenting the woman on her critical judgment – of his own. The similarly familiar tone suggests that both passages address the same woman, and the absence of any name or title raises suspicions that an original preface might have been lost in transmission. Proposals to fill the void have not gone wanting, and the two leading candidates would tie Diogenes directly into the imperial court: a "dearest friend" of Galen's and fervent admirer of Plato named Arria (*On Theriac* 1.3), or the empress Julia Domna herself (c. 170–217), consort of the first Severus and mother to his heir Caracalla.[8] Either possibility would fit neatly with the rest of the picture we have reconstructed; but again there is no solid evidence for either. Tantalizing prospects of direct imperial connections, though plausible, remain speculative, as does any activity in Rome in the first place.[9]

As the search for our author has led us into the thickets of his work, it may be helpful to sum up what we have found before briefly previewing what he wrote. His name, we may be confident, was Diogenes, and only marginally less confident that he was a native of Laertes in the Roman province of Cilicia, born late in the Antonine age, under Marcus Aurelius or possibly Commodus (160–190 CE). As his writing demonstrates, he was educated to a high polish in the standard élite curriculum of Greek literature, rhetoric, and philosophy, and though details of his philosophical studies remain controversial, his *Lives* show him widely read in both poetry and scholarship, including philosophical work, and a fastidious bibliophile concerned both to cite and to

[8] Levick (2007) 107–23 (113 on Diogenes) presents a balanced account of what has been called Domna's 'circle'; cf. Whitmarsh (2007).

[9] Neither the city nor Roman culture play any significant role in the *Lives*, where they are named only six times: three in titles (2.104, 5.61, 7.35), once each in a list of native Italians who heard Pythagoras c. 500 BCE (8.14), for the location of a statue c. 200 BCE (8.72), and for an example of cultural relativism (9.84), all three evidently derived from earlier sources.