

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01669-9 - The Art of Biography in Antiquity
Tomas Hägg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

THE ART OF BIOGRAPHY IN ANTIQUITY

Greek and Roman biography embraces much more than Plutarch, Suetonius and their lost Hellenistic antecedents. In this book Professor Hägg explores the whole range and diversity of ancient biography, from its Socratic beginnings to the Christian acquisition of the form in Late Antiquity. He shows how creative writers developed the lives of popular heroes like Homer, Aesop and Alexander, and how the Christian gospels grew from bare sayings to full lives. In Imperial Rome biography flourished in the works of Greek writers: Lucian's satire, Philostratus' full sophistic orchestration, Porphyry's intellectual portrait of Plotinus. Perhaps surprisingly, it is not political biography or the lives of poets that provide the main artery of ancient biography, but various kinds of philosophical, spiritual and ethical lives. Applying a consistent biographical reading to a representative set of surviving texts, this book opens up the manifold but often neglected art of biography in classical antiquity.

TOMAS HÄGG was Emeritus Professor of Classics at the University of Bergen. His previous publications include *The Novel in Antiquity* (1983) and *The Virgin and her Lover* (2003).

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01669-9 - The Art of Biography in Antiquity
Tomas Hägg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01669-9 - The Art of Biography in Antiquity
Tomas Hägg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

THE ART OF BIOGRAPHY IN ANTIQUITY

TOMAS HÄGG



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-01669-9 - The Art of Biography in Antiquity
 Tomas Hägg
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
 Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107016699

© Tomas Hägg 2012

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2012

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
 Hägg, Tomas.

The art of biography in Antiquity / Tomas Hägg.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-01669-9 (hardback)

1. Classical biography – History and criticism. 2. Biography as a literary form. I. Title.

PA3043.H33 2012

880.9'35 – dc23 2011049119

ISBN 978-1-107-01669-9 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01669-9 - The Art of Biography in Antiquity
Tomas Hägg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

*For Henny
Daniel, Anna, Sara*

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01669-9 - The Art of Biography in Antiquity
Tomas Hägg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xv
Prolegomena on biography modern and ancient	I
1 In the beginning was Xenophon: Memoir, encomium, romance	10
1.1 Glimpses of a prehistory	10
1.2 Socrates in the Socratic mirror: <i>Apology</i> , <i>Phaedo</i> , <i>Memorabilia</i>	19
1.3 Isocrates on Evagoras, his model king	30
1.4 Xenophon on Agesilaus' deeds and virtues	41
1.5 The <i>Education of Cyrus</i>	51
2 Hellenistic theory and practice: Fragments of industry	67
2.1 Fragments and hypotheses	67
2.2 Aristoxenus' Lives of Pythagoras and Socrates	69
2.3 Satyrus' <i>Life of Euripides</i>	77
2.4 Hermippus the Callimachean	84
2.5 Antigonus of Carystus	89
2.6 Unity and diversity	93
3 Popular heroes: The slave, the king, the poet	99
3.1 Open biography	99
3.2 The <i>Life of Aesop</i>	101
3.3 The <i>Life of Alexander</i> of Pseudo-Callisthenes	117
3.4 Lives of Homer	134
3.5 Conclusion	146
4 The gospels: From sayings to a full Life	148
4.1 What were the gospels?	148
4.2 The sayings of Jesus	156
4.3 The canonical gospels	161

4.4	Birth and infancy gospels	172
4.5	Jesus at thirty: Four canonical portraits	180
5	Political biography at Rome: A new start	187
5.1	Change of scene	187
5.2	Nepos and his <i>Life of Atticus</i>	188
5.3	Nicolaus of Damascus: A Greek <i>Life of Augustus</i>	197
5.4	Tacitus in praise of his father-in-law	204
5.5	Suetonius on poets and emperors	214
5.6	The Romanness of Roman biography	232
6	Plutarch and his <i>Parallel Lives</i> : Ethical biography	239
6.1	A Roman Greek	239
6.2	A double Life: Demosthenes and Cicero	244
6.3	Plutarch on his aims and methods	268
6.4	Plutarch and the biographical tradition	277
7	Ways of life: Philosophers and holy men	282
7.1	Everything to do with Pythagoras?	282
7.2	The satirical mirror: Lucian	284
7.3	Secundus the Silent Philosopher	300
7.4	The philosophical gallery: Diogenes Laertius	305
7.5	Sophistic biography: Philostratus on Apollonius of Tyana	318
7.6	Collective biography: Philostratus on his sophistic colleagues	341
7.7	Porphyry and Iamblichus on Pythagoras: A comparative reading	352
7.8	Intellectual biography: Porphyry on the life and books of Plotinus	368
	Epilogue on ancient and Christian biography	380
	<i>Further reading</i>	390
	<i>Bibliography</i>	417
	<i>Index</i>	476

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01669-9 - The Art of Biography in Antiquity
Tomas Hägg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

This book is not a history of the ‘biographical genre’ in antiquity; it is about the art of biography as it was practised by a number of Greek and Roman creative writers from about 400 BC to about AD 300. Interpretation of the extant texts is allowed to dominate over discussion of the possible nature of the many lost ones. An inclusive definition of ‘biography’ is applied, namely a literary text of book length telling the life story of an historical individual from cradle to grave (or a substantial part of it). And the story must be told by someone else: autobiography, as something basically different, is kept out of the picture. Specimens of collective biography and shorter biographical works may be included, as long as the life of the individual(s) is the structuring principle and main interest, rather than an idea or an historical process. The actual proportion of historicity against fictitiousness is not used as a criterion for inclusion or exclusion, nor the degree of objectivity as opposed to bias or special purpose. Thus, the gospels, the *Life of Aesop*, and Tacitus’ *Agricola* are treated alongside Plutarch, Suetonius, and other representatives of the more restricted canon.

In writing the book, I have had in mind both students of classical antiquity and people more generally interested in biography. As far as feasible, I try to let the texts themselves speak first, through generous quotation in translation and summaries of contents, before I turn to analysis and interpretation. The idea that a reader of a book of this kind, be it a classicist or a generalist, knows the texts sufficiently well in advance or has them at hand to consult continuously is a pious illusion: it is better to bring the texts physically into the discussion, and hope that the samples offered give an appetite for subsequent reading of at least some of them in full. If it had not become a cliché, I might have called the book ‘Reading Ancient Biography’; that is at any rate what I am literally doing, attempting to convey something of a reader’s experience of the text as it progresses. At the same time, of course, it has been important to bring in the best of the

available scholarship (old or new) on each text and author, for illumination and deeper understanding.

After the novel, biography is probably the most-read literary form today. Though its current exemplars are constantly under public debate, it is still perhaps the form that remains least studied from an academic point of view. It shares with the novel the further distinction of being often regarded as a modern creation, the literary response to modern individualism, owing its present excellence to the combined impact of modern psychology and historical scholarship. Plutarch and Suetonius are certainly acknowledged as ancient forerunners; but other forms of biographical literature that flourished in classical antiquity (and in the Middle Ages, for that matter) are mostly left out of consideration when the history of the genre is discussed. Demonstrating what kinds of ancient texts of relevance to this discussion we actually possess may therefore be useful; for there are signs that biography is at last beginning to attract more serious critical and scholarly attention.

One of my aims, then, is to look at the various ancient forms of biography with modern biography in mind, in order to show what the constants are – in structure, literary *topoi*, rhetorical schemes, means of characterization – and where the main differences may be spotted. If I do not so often spell out the affinities or discrepancies, it is because they will be easily appreciated by any reader interested in biography. Turning to my fellow classicists, I would claim that Greek and Roman biography has been one of our more neglected fields of study. It was for most of the time a minor literary form in antiquity, it is true, but still tenacious and productive throughout the seven centuries covered here. Biography as a branch of historiography has been eagerly, sometimes profitably, studied; but the *art* of biography, with the important exception of Plutarch, has attracted less attention than it merits. Many of the texts, to be sure, have been abundantly studied from other literary perspectives; what I contribute is consistently seeing them, reading them, as biographies. By attempting an overview of the field, incorporating what I have found useful in earlier research, it will also be clear where the more significant lacunae in our knowledge are situated, hopefully inciting more specialized studies. That the emerging picture is a provisional one, and that there are other texts that might also have been included, needs hardly to be said.

As I have already stressed, the emphasis on biography as an art means that the discussion of lost texts, so prominent in earlier studies, will have to yield to the study of those we really possess. Literary connections and influences can perhaps sometimes be studied in the absence of the texts (though it is a risky undertaking); art cannot. Trying to compete with –

Preface

xi

not to speak of ‘replacing’ – the standard works of a Leo or Dihle or Momigliano would anyway be foolish; changing the perspective is the best option. My principal aim is not to trace historical interrelationships or lines of ‘development’. Nor is my heart in generic classification, the game of delimiting genres and distinguishing subgenres. The more I have worked with these texts, the less I can see the point in drawing borders where the authors themselves so obviously moved over mapless terrain. Some of the literary highlights, such as Tacitus’ *Agricola* and Philostratus’ *Apollonius*, are taxonomical nightmares. I do address generic questions quite often; but then it is mostly because I think such a discussion is apt to bring out the characteristics of a certain composition, or because ‘genre expectation’ (a most valid issue) is at stake. I have no specific agenda in this respect: I want to show that the works I am treating may with profit be read as biographies, not that they ‘are’ biographies rather than, say, historiography, doxography, protreptics, panegyrics, novels or ‘gospels’.

I am well aware that it may disappoint some readers that the book does not approach the biographical texts of antiquity from a theoretically more challenging angle. They have a point; it is true that modern cultural and literary theory in particular has enriched and renewed the study of Greek and Roman literature in recent years. But this is the book I felt able to write, and enjoyed writing. Moreover, I think it may be useful to have the full range of principal texts presented and studied in traditional terms before more adventurous ways of reading them are explored. This is not the final word.

Lastly, my wish to demonstrate the latitude and diversity of Greek and Roman biographical literature has necessitated that the (few) acknowledged masters are more concisely characterized and selectively studied than their intrinsic value and historical importance would merit. This was made possible – and is I hope excusable – due to the amount of excellent work on these texts to draw on and refer to.

*

The most important among my personal debts is to my colleague and friend Jostein Børtnes, Professor Emeritus of Russian Literature at the University of Bergen. We worked together in the early 1990s on a joint project focussing on biography and hagiography in Late Antiquity, reaching backwards to ancient biographical conventions and forwards to Byzantine and Slavonic hagiography (and ending with Dostoevsky). The present work was originally planned as a *Vorarbeit* on my part for the more specialized study of the emergence of hagiography that we intended to write together (but never wrote). Books (like collective projects) tend to take their own

unforeseen ways, and what I am now presenting is something very different in structure, thought, and size from what I had in mind at the time. Jostein should be credited for his initial inspiration and innumerable discussions through the years, but the responsibility for the kind of book it became is entirely mine.

The actual writing started at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, where I had the privilege of spending the academic year 1992/3 as a Member of the School of Historical Studies. That happy period of ideal working conditions was followed by fifteen years when other academic tasks at the University of Bergen, including collective research projects, took most of my time and energy. Often, the time I was able to spend in a whole year on my most cherished project was just a week or two, preferably in some distant haven for undisturbed reading and writing. Only after retiring in 2008 from my university chair could this work become more like a full-time occupation. Though I have done my best to revise and update the parts of the book written earlier, I hope that my readers will show indulgence towards any unevenness and inconsistency that still remains and any unfortunate lacunae in my knowledge of more recent research.

With such a long period of gestation, there are many persons and institutions to thank. The University of Bergen has supported my work over the years with periods of sabbatical leave and travel grants. Its University Library has been most helpful in providing research material. I would like to mention Kari Normo, who has indefatigably supplied me with inter-library loans and copies from the most unlikely places, and Kari Walde for her understanding and expeditiousness regarding my suggestions for new books to buy. But still I have had a constant need to go to those places where 'all' the books and journals in the field are at hand at once for easy consultation: the Bodleian and the Ashmolean, now Sackler Library at Oxford, both of which I have been happy to visit regularly through the years; the Firestone Library at Princeton University and the library at the Institute for Advanced Study; the splendid Fondation Hardt at Vandœuvre, where I have worked for two periods; the Library of the Theological Faculty at the University of Oslo; and the Widener Library at Harvard University, where some of my updating took place in late 2009.

Several colleagues have read whole chapters of my work while it was still in progress. I would like to thank, in particular, Samuel Byrskog, Stephen Harrison, and David Konstan. Many more – too many to name – have commented on one part or other at seminars, or after guest lectures, at the Universities of Bergen, Oslo, Agder, Copenhagen, Lund, Gothenburg, and Uppsala; furthermore, at the Universities of Murcia, Munich, Graz,

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01669-9 - The Art of Biography in Antiquity
Tomas Hägg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

xiii

Vienna, Cyprus, Crete (Rethymnon), and Athens, Columbia University, and the University of California, LA. Colleagues in my department at the University of Bergen and collaborators in several interdisciplinary research projects deserve my special thanks for their constructive criticism and patience over the years with my special interest. A complete list would be very long, but I mention Jostein Børtnes, Tormod Eide, Ingvild Gilhus, Tor Hauken, David Hellholm, Lars Boje Mortensen, Halvor Moxnes, Richard Holton Pierce, Samuel Rubenson, Pär Sandin, Mathilde Skoie, Einar Thomassen, and Gjert Vestrheim.

Michael Sharp, Classics Editor for Cambridge University Press, welcomed my manuscript, unintimidated by its length, and provided me with exceptionally helpful reports from two anonymous readers; their encouragement and constructive criticism were decisive for the completion of the manuscript. No sooner, however, had I by the end of March 2011 delivered my final version to the Press than I was diagnosed with a fatal disease. The diagnosis left me with no doubt that I would be unable to take on the full responsibility myself for the final editorial process. The compilation of the Index was thus through the good offices of the Press entrusted to the competent hands of Barbara Hird, while my friend and former colleague Stephen Harrison most kindly and unselfishly promised to help me out with the copy-editing. In addition, my wife Henny has provided indispensable practical assistance with the manuscript in this last period. To all those mentioned here as well as the excellent staff of the Press go my heartfelt thanks for their understanding and kindness in a difficult situation.

Dedicating the book to Henny and our children is just a small token of my gratitude for their inspiring presence, all through more than twenty years of life that my family and book have shared.

Kristiansand
Tomas Hägg

Tomas Hägg died on 11 August 2011. I am honoured to see this volume through the press in memory of a fine colleague and friend.

Oxford
Stephen Harrison

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-01669-9 - The Art of Biography in Antiquity
 Tomas Hägg
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1984, p. 151. (Prolegomena, epigraph.)

Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*, translated and annotated by Wayne Ambler. Copyright © 2001 by Cornell University Press. Used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press. (Ch. 1.5, translated extracts.)

Life of Aesop. Translated by Lloyd W. Daly in *Aesop Without Morals: The Famous Fables, and a Life of Aesop*, New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961. (Ch. 3.2, translated extracts.)

Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery, London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910, p. 7. (Ch. 4, epigraph.)

Cicero, *ad fam.* 5.12.5. Translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey in *Cicero's Letters to his Friends, Vol. 1*, Penguin Classics; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978, pp. 74–5. (Ch. 5, epigraph.)

M. F. Burnyeat, 'Other Lives', *London Review of Books* 29 [2007] (4), 3–6, on p. 3. (Ch. 7, epigraph, quoted by permission.)

Lucian, *Selected Dialogues*, translated by C. D. N. Costa (2005) from 'The Death of Peregrinus', 'Alexander or the False Prophet', and 'Demonax' by permission of Oxford University Press. (Ch. 7.2, selected extracts.)

Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. Reprinted by permission of the publishers and the Trustees of the Loeb Classical Library from Philostratus: Volumes 1–II, Loeb Classical Library® Volumes 16, 17, translated by Christopher P. Jones, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, © 2005 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. The Loeb Classical Library® is a registered trademark of the President and Fellows of Harvard College. (Ch. 7.5, translated extracts.)

Abbreviations

<i>ANRW</i>	H. Temporini and W. Haase (eds.), <i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt</i> , Berlin
<i>FGrHist</i>	F. Jacoby <i>et al.</i> , <i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> , Berlin, Leiden
<i>LCL</i>	Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., London
<i>LSJ</i>	H. Liddell and R. Scott, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , 9th ed. with sup. (1968), Oxford
<i>NRSV</i>	New Revised Standard Version (of the Bible)
<i>OCD₃</i>	S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (eds.), <i>The Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> , 3rd ed. (1996)
<i>OCT</i>	Oxford Classical Texts [Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis], Oxford
<i>OWC</i>	World's Classics, later Oxford World's Classics
<i>PC</i>	Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth
<i>RE</i>	Pauly's <i>Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> , Stuttgart
<i>RGG</i>	<i>Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> , 4th ed., Tübingen 1998–2007
<i>SEG</i>	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i>
<i>TrGF</i>	<i>Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta</i> , Göttingen
<i>UPZ</i>	<i>Urkunden der Ptolemäerzeit (Ältere Funde)</i> , Vol. I, ed. Ulrich Wilcken, Berlin and Leipzig 1927

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01669-9 - The Art of Biography in Antiquity
Tomas Hägg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)
