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I LIFE AND CAREER OF NICOLAUS

Thanks to excerpts that survive from N.'s autobiography (*IB*) and Josephus' accounts of his career at the court of Herod the Great, a great deal more is known about N. than about the vast majority of ancient writers. The autobiography offers significant information about N.'s lineage, education, opinions and self-representation, while Josephus in his *Antiquitates Judaicae* presents a substantial account of N.'s career in Jerusalem in the last decade of Herod's reign. It is a collection of evidence that provides insight into how N.'s relationships with Herod and Augustus developed; why certain themes are prominent in the *Bios*; and how N. came to have such a dispassionate view of the assassins and their plot against Caesar while at the same time giving full approval to Octavian's ambition to attain Caesar's power.

(i) Lineage, Education and Career to 14 BC

According to his autobiography (*IB* 1.1–3), N. was the son of a member of the governing and social elite of Damascus. His father Antipater had held all local offices in the city, he was an accomplished orator and highly respected for his talent as an emissary to neighboring states. The family's piety toward the Greek gods, their names (although names are no guarantee of ethnic origin) and all other evidence concerning the family of N. suggest that if they were not Greek by ethnicity, they certainly were intellectually and culturally, as most likely was their social milieu in Damascus.¹ But this passage on the

¹ F. Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 BC–AD 337* (Cambridge, Mass. 1993) 314 and id. "Empire, community and culture in the Roman Near East: Greeks, Syrians, Jews and Arabs," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38 (1987) 149–50. That N. was not Jewish is argued by K. Patsch, "Zu Nicolaus von Damascus," *WS* 12 (1890) 231–39.

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lineage of N. constitutes some of our earliest evidence for the social character of Damascus, and so it is difficult to say much more than what it offers about the cultural context in which N. spent his youth.²

N. was born ca. 64 BC, since he says that he was around sixty years old when he journeyed to Rome after the death of Herod in 4 BC (*IB* 6.8), and the autobiography (*IB* 2) provides a fulsome description of his education and devotion to the philosophy of Aristotle.³ Although claims of precocious intellectual development seem to have been a trope in ancient autobiography and encomiastic biography, N.'s comments on his education and teaching are significant. Pedagogy seems to have been N.'s main activity for much of his early career, and so *paideia* was fundamental to his rise at the court of Herod and elsewhere. He was at some point the διδάσκαλος of the children of Antonius and Cleopatra and is called the παιδευτής of Herod (T 2); in his autobiography N. depicts his relationship with Herod as that of an intellectual mentor and coach (*IB* 5). Some of N.'s works on Aristotle may have been written for Herod, but there is no reason to think that the pursuit of knowledge did not remain a lifelong activity of Nicolaus. He produced a compendium of the philosophy of Aristotle along with a number of other treatises on his work,⁴ later writers identify N. as ὁ φιλόσοφος and the "Peripatetic" (TT 1, 2, 10a–b, 11) and he himself claims to

² F. Millar, "The problem of Hellenistic Syria" in A. Kuhrt and S. Sherwin-White, edd. *Hellenism in the East* (Berkeley–Los Angeles 1987) 125.

³ N. claimed to have written reputable drama; on the issue of a possible citation from one of his comedies (Stob. 3.14.7 = R. Kassel and C. Austin, edd. *Poetae Comici Graeci* (Berlin and New York 1989) 7.52–54) cf. Müller (1849) 344, L. Dindorf, "Nikolaos von Damaskos," *Jahrbücher für classische Philologie*. A. Fleckeisen, ed. (1869) 108n. and Körte, *RE* xvii s.v. "Nikolaos" (19). It does not seem likely that a tragedy entitled Σωσάννη by ὁ Δαμασκηνός (Eustath. *ad Dion. Perieg.* 976) was by Nicolaus.

⁴ Cf. Drossaart Lulofs (1965). It is possible that N.'s access to and enthusiasm for Aristotle were due to the recent edition of the philosopher's collected works by Andronicus of Rhodes (K. O. Brink, *RE* Suppl. vii 938–45), and N.'s sons seem to have been resident in Rhodes during their early adult years, possibly studying philosophy; cf. *IB* 4 and discussion below.

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have been criticized in Roman society for neglecting social conventions in his pursuit of philosophy (*IB* 8).⁵

The earliest evidence for the career of N. only comes in 14 BC with his appearance as an influential φίλος in the entourage of Herod, when the King traveled with Marcus Agrippa through Asia Minor (*IB* 4 and *Jos. AJ* 16.27–58). Nevertheless, isolated statements yield a probable outline of N.'s career before 14 BC, and it indicates that family connections and N.'s own talents seem to have been the significant factors in his rise at the court of Herod.⁶

Strabo (15.1.73) says that N. provided an eyewitness description of Augustus' reception of Indian ambassadors at Daphne near Antioch in 20 BC. Therefore, it seems that already by that date N. was influential enough with Herod to be traveling with him as the King accompanied the Princeps during his sojourn that year in the East (*Jos. AJ* 15.354–64).

Sophronius of Damascus (T 2) provides the intriguing information that N. was at some point the διδάσκαλος of the children of Antonius and Cleopatra.⁷ This statement raises the question of how and when N. came to be in such a position, and it is an important question since the reconstruction of N.'s career before 20 BC depends on the answer. It has been suggested that N. was tutor to the children in the 20s BC in the house of Augustus at Rome, where they were brought after Octavian's victory in Egypt.⁸ This supposition entails the

⁵ It seems that Roman aristocracy conceded the value of education in philosophy for a young man, but only as a means for more important training (*Cic. De rep.* 1.30 and 32). Philosophy pursued too far could render a youth intemperate (*Tac. Agr.* 4.5) and an adult useless to his community (*Plato, Gorg.* 484c–86d). N.'s life-long profession of philosophy may have served to establish an identity in Rome unrelated to his public career as the envoy and intimate friend of Herod for many years in Jerusalem. Augustus' famous comment that Herod's pigs were better off than his sons (*Macrob.* 2.4.11) gives some sense of Herod's posthumous reputation among the Roman aristocracy.

⁶ Laqueur, *RE* xvii 365.

⁷ There is no way to assess the accuracy of this claim; *Plut. Ant.* 72.2 refers to Euphronius as the διδάσκαλος of Cleopatra's children in 30 BC.

⁸ Bellemore (1984) xv and Parmentier & Barone (2011) xiii–xiv.

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problem, for which there is no good solution, of how the son of a local Damascene aristocrat first came to be employed in the home of the Princes and then within a few years appears among the most influential advisors of a Jewish king. There is a more probable explanation of Sophronius' statement. The term διδάσκαλος is more appropriate to the teacher of young children than to the instructor of the teenage children of Antonius and Cleopatra in the mid-20s, and so it is probable that N. was teaching the children at the court in Alexandria in the late 30s BC.⁹ This not only accords better with what Sophronius says but has the advantage of coordinating with a plausible explanation of how N. came to be in Alexandria and then appears as an influential φίλος in the entourage of Herod by 20 BC.

Important to understanding how N. came to be associated with Herod is the fact that both N. and his brother Ptolemaeus came to be influential φίλοι at the court of Herod. In fact, Josephus says that Ptolemaeus was one of the most honored of Herod's "friends" (Jos. *AJ* 17.225 and *BJ* 2.21). The fact that both brothers had identical careers with Herod makes it likely that there was a family connection involved. At various times in the 40s Herod spent time in Damascus, where he must have become acquainted with the local aristocracy,¹⁰ and to judge from the evidence of the Suda (*IB* 1), N.'s father Antipater would probably have been among those he met.¹¹ At the time of Herod's visits to Damascus, N. would have been in his late teens and early twenties. Based on the description of N.'s character in

⁹ Parmentier & Barone (2011) xiii.

¹⁰ The city provided Herod with refuge in 47 or 46 BC, when he was warned that the synhedrion intended to put him to death; in these same years he was appointed governor of Coele Syria after bribing the Roman magistrate Sextus Julius Caesar (Jos. *AJ* 14.177–80), and in 43 Caesar's assassin Cassius may have appointed him governor of Coele Syria again. Finally, he was in Damascus in 42 with a Roman *strategos* named Fabius (Jos. *AJ* 14.295 and *BJ* 1.236).

¹¹ Roller (1998) 224 thinks they may have become acquainted as early as the 60s BC.

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the Suda (*IB* 2), it seems reasonable that a young man of high intelligence and Hellenic education (and his brother) would have come to the attention of the philhellene Herod, and so arrangements were made for them to reside at the court of Herod.¹² Throughout the Hellenistic era service at the courts of local monarchs by their citizens had been a source of influence and power for communities looking to benefit from the favor and resources of those rulers.¹³ Later, when Herod had secured his position as king of the Jews and probably when N. and his brother Ptolemaeus enjoyed the status of “friends of the king,” the King built a theater and gymnasium at Damascus. His relationship with N. and his brother Ptolemaeus must have been crucial to Damascus securing these and other benefactions (*IB* 7.6).¹⁴

A relationship with Herod going back to the mid or late 40s can then explain how N. came to be the tutor of the children of Antonius and Cleopatra in Alexandria in the 30s. Herod had a long-standing relationship with Antonius. Herod’s father Antipater had been a friend of Antonius, and it was Antonius who appointed Herod tetrarch in 41 BC. Then in 40 Antonius in Rome arranged for Herod’s appointment as king of the Jews.¹⁵ For his part, Herod built buildings in honor of Antonius, visited Antonius in Alexandria

¹² Ptolemaeus, the brother of N., may have been in the entourage of Herod as early as 40 BC (cf. Jos. *BJ* 1.280), and it may have been through this connection that N. came to the court of Herod; cf. Parmentier & Barone (2011) xv–xvi.

¹³ On the Hellenistic practice of sending sons to reside with kings, cf. D. Braund, *Rome and the friendly king: the character of client kingship* (London 1984) 9–21; on benefits to the communities, Habicht (1958) 7 and G. Herman, “The ‘friends’ of the early Hellenistic rulers: servants or officials?,” *Talanta* 12/13 (1980/81) 113–14.

¹⁴ *Philoi* often acted “as mediators between the kings and their own communities of origin, deriving substantial benefits from both systems” (G. Herman, s. v. “Friendship” in S. Hornblower, A. Spawforth and E. Eidinow, edd. *The Oxford classical dictionary*, 4th edn (Oxford 2012) 592); on Herod and Damascus, cf. Jos. *BJ* 1.422 and Roller (1998) 224–25.

¹⁵ Jos. *AJ* 14.326 and 379–88 and *BJ* 1.281–85 and 38, Strabo 16.2.46, App. *BC* 5.75/319 and Tac. *Hist.* 5.9.2.

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on more than one occasion, and entertained him in Judaea. Herod offered to supply troops for the campaign at Actium, and after Antonius' defeat, in a meeting with Octavian on Rhodes in 30 BC, the King did not deny his friendship with Antonius but rather presented it as proof that he would be a loyal friend to Octavian.¹⁶ In light of their regular contact and mutual support throughout the 30s, it is plausible that Herod would have sent the talented but still relatively young N. to the court of Alexandria to provide the children of the philhellene Antonius with a proper elementary education in the Greek way.¹⁷ Furthermore, N.'s presence at the court in Alexandria would also have strengthened Herod's relationship with Antonius and possibly aided in resisting Cleopatra's efforts to persuade Antonius to transfer Herod's realm into her control.¹⁸ If N. was still in Alexandria after Actium,¹⁹ it seems reasonable that Herod would have arranged for his return to Jerusalem when the King journeyed to Egypt to meet with Octavian there in 30 BC. Octavian was persuaded by the philosopher Areius to be merciful to his fellow philosophers at Alexandria (Plut. *Ant.* 80), and N. could well have been among those who (along with the Gallic guard) were transferred from the court of Alexandria to Jerusalem (Jos. *AJ* 15.217 and *BJ* 1.396–97).²⁰

¹⁶ Josephus (*AJ* 15.409 and 18.92) says that Herod rebuilt the fortified portion of the temple in Jerusalem and named it Antonia to gratify Antonius. On the relationship between Herod and Antonius: *AJ* 14.303, 325–29, 445–47; the offer of troops for Actium: *AJ* 15.109–10; Herod's meeting with Octavian: *AJ* 15.184–93 and *BJ* 1.387–90.

¹⁷ Laqueur, *RE* xvii 365 thinks Cleopatra may have come to know N. when she visited Damascus in 36 BC (Jos. *BJ* 1.362 and *AJ* 15.96); cf. also Misch (1950) 1.307 and Stern (1976) 1.227.

¹⁸ For Cleopatra's designs on Judaea cf. Jos. *AJ* 15.75–79, 92 and 115–16.

¹⁹ He may have left before Actium; cf. Malitz (2003) 1–2.

²⁰ Possibly many scholars and artists migrated to the court of Herod from Alexandria in 30 BC; cf. Roller (1998) 56–57. Cichorius (1922) 317 suggests that Philostratus, a court philosopher of Cleopatra, may have ended up at the court of Herod; cf. also E. Rawson (1991) 36 n90. Roller (1998) 57–65 shows that a number of the φίλοι of Herod in Jerusalem had familial or other connections to Alexandria.

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(ii) Nicolaus at the Court of Herod, 14–4 BC

If it had been family connections that put N. and his brother at the court of Jerusalem, his rise as a φίλος there must have been due to his own talents. But there are only scattered bits of evidence for N.'s career with Herod before he appears in Josephus as the King's most influential advisor and envoy to Roman authority in the last decade of his reign. As suggested above, Strabo (15.1.73) indicates that N. was already important enough to accompany Herod as he traveled with Augustus in 20 BC, and so it was during the decade after Actium that N. rose to be the King's close and trusted companion. N.'s advancement may have been facilitated by the execution of four of Herod's closest "friends" for conspiracy after 27 BC (Jos. *AJ* 15.252–66), and his later career suggests that a combination of learning, rhetorical skill and political acumen aided his rise in the treacherous and murderous environment of Herod's court. Descriptions of N. as Herod's παιδευτής (T 2) and ὑπογραφεύς (T 3) may indicate aspects of N.'s service to the King in earlier years, and an excerpt of N.'s autobiography (*IB* 5) is instructive for understanding how N. may have gained influence with Herod.

After completing his universal history for Herod, N. says that he and Herod once again engaged in philosophy and N. was invited by the King to accompany him on his ship as they journeyed to Rome. The tenor of *IB* 5 suggests that the completion of N.'s universal history for Herod led to a new intimacy in their relationship,²¹ and there was a precedent for this. At the court of Antiochus the Great, the historian Hegesianax was rewarded with the status of φίλος to that king and an income after he pleased Antiochus with a reading from his history (Athenaeus 4.155b); and, as N. did for Herod, Hegesianax went on to act as an envoy to the Romans for Antiochus (Polyb. 18.47.1–4 and 50.3, and App. *Syr.* 23).

²¹ As *IB* 5 shows, a purpose of the autobiography would have been to defend N.'s "association with Herod, a man notorious for his inhumanity"—Wacholder (1962) 30.

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After he became king, Herod made two trips to Rome, in 17 and in 13 or 12 BC,²² and so the description in *IB* 5 would seem to be related to one of these two dates.

In Josephus, N. appears in the last decade of Herod's reign as the most powerful and influential of the King's φίλοι. It must have been in that capacity that N. became familiar with the manipulation and intrigue associated with autocratic power, the understanding of which is evident in the *Bios*. The φίλοι of kings were an institution of Hellenistic courts, and the king's "friends" were chosen solely on their ability to get along with the king personally and execute the assignments he gave them.²³ As a body the φίλοι formed a council of state to advise the king and provided a reservoir of talent from which he chose his military officers, governors of provinces, ministers of state and ambassadors. There were no particular specializations that characterized these men entrusted with high office and power. Artists, writers, philosophers, doctors and scholars were all potential recruits, but once they became the king's φίλοι they might be assigned a variety of tasks.²⁴ In N.'s case that meant being everything from Herod's amanuensis and providing intellectual diversion to serving as his envoy and advocate before Agrippa and Augustus. The relationship of a king to his "friends" was personal and familiar, one entered into freely by the φίλος to the mutual benefit of both parties: a king's φίλοι enjoyed property, influence and honor due to their relationship with the king.²⁵ Polybius (7.14.6) placed a high estimate on a king's choice of his "friends": prudently chosen, φίλοι could be the difference between the success and failure of a king's rule.²⁶

²² For a date of 13 BC for Herod's last trip to Rome, cf. Kokkinos (1998) 371–72.

²³ Hellenistic royal courts provide the context and evidence for understanding the functions of Herod's φίλοι; cf. W. Otto, *RE* Supp. II 82.

²⁴ Walbank, in *The Cambridge Ancient History* 2nd edn (Cambridge 1961–) 7.1.69 and Habicht (1958) 7.

²⁵ Habicht (1958) 10.

²⁶ Herod manifestly failed in his selection of "friends" who would promote concord among his three sons after he had proclaimed them his heirs; cf. Jos. *BJ* 1.460.

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Three aspects of these royal φίλοι are particularly relevant to N.'s career with Herod. First, φίλοι at Hellenistic courts seem always to be ethnic Greeks, or at least by the second century BC if any were non-Greeks, they were fully Hellenized in language and culture and may have taken Greek names.²⁷ From the names of Herod's φίλοι, it seems that a large majority of his "friends" (if not all) were Greeks by culture if not by ethnicity.²⁸ N.'s own career indicates that Herod's Hellenizing tendencies were supported by φίλοι drawn from the Greek diaspora, and this exclusion of the native element from the φίλοι gave a Hellenistic king's court the character of rule by a foreign element.²⁹ This perception certainly applied in the case of Herod. A considerable element of the population of Judaea did not consider rule by the Idumaeen Herod legitimate to begin with, and he had the reputation of being more favorable to Greek communities than to his Jewish population (Jos. *AJ* 19.329). After Herod's death the people rose up against Herod's sons and "the Greeks" (*IB* 6.8), the atmosphere in Jerusalem became extremely hostile for those who had been held in honor by the King, and the people were calling for their punishment (Jos. *AJ* 17.207 and *BJ* 2.7).

²⁷ Habicht (1958) 5, followed by J. Ma, "Kings" in A. Erskine, ed. *A companion to the Hellenistic World* (Malden, Mass.—Oxford—Carlton, Aus. 2003) 187–88 and R. Strootman, "Kings and cities in the Hellenistic Age" in O. M. van Nijf & R. Alston, edd. *Political culture in the Greek city after the classical age* (Leuven—Paris—Walpole, Mass. 2011) 148–49. That Greek names do not necessarily mean Greek ethnicity among the φίλοι of a Hellenistic court; cf. W. Otto, *RE* Suppl. 2.85–86 and S. Sherwin White and A. Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A new approach to the Seleucid empire* (Berkeley—Los Angeles 1993) 124–25.

²⁸ Of Herod's φίλοι Roller (1998) 57 thinks Alexas (Jos. *BJ* 1.566) may have been Jewish. One Antipater had the Aramaic surname Gadia (Jos. *AJ* 15.252), which might indicate a Jewish origin. Dositheus (*AJ* 14.236–37 and 16.252–60, and *FGrHist.* no. 236 F 1) was heavily involved in Jewish causes, and his name was a common one in Hellenistic Judaea; Roller (1998) 58–59 thinks he may have been Jewish. Sappinus (*AJ* 16.257) or Samphinius (*BJ* 1.280) may have been an Egyptian—Roller (1998) 64.

²⁹ Habicht (1958) 10.

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Second, Josephus says (*BJ* 1.458–60) that Herod carefully chose φίλοι to be the advisors and companions (συγγενεῖς καὶ φίλους) of his sons as they were being groomed for rule, and the φίλοι were involved in the instruction of Herod's sons (*Jos. AJ* 16.242).³⁰ This fact suggests an explanation of how N. came into the service of Herod and then moved to Alexandria. Antipater, Herod's oldest son by his first wife Doris, was born ca. 46 BC,³¹ but both mother and son were banished from the court at Jerusalem after the mid-30s when Herod married the Hasmonean Mariamme and she gave birth to two sons (*Jos. BJ* 1.433). It has already been suggested that the philhellene Herod might have recruited N. to Jerusalem, and now a specific reason presents itself for his doing so. By the late 40s N. already enjoyed local fame as a scholar in Damascus, and so Herod may have brought him to Jerusalem to be the teacher of his first son Antipater. But when Antipater and his mother were banished from the city because of Mariamme's jealousy over the status of her sons, it would very likely have become a difficult atmosphere for his young teacher, and so suitable employment was found in a similar capacity for N. as the διδάσκαλος of the children of Antonius and Cleopatra in Alexandria.³²

Finally, while an honored φίλος of Herod enjoyed great reward and influence, such status entailed comparable risk. Herod's domestic and political situation, persistently riven by familial jealousy and political and religious factionalism, deteriorated in his last decade because of his increasing paranoia and the rivalry for his succession. Naturally those closest to him ran the greatest risk. In his grief and depression after his execution of Mariamme in 29 BC, Herod slew four of his

³⁰ One Gemellus was with Herod's son Alexander during his years of education and schooling (ἐν ταῖς τροφαῖς καὶ τῇ παιδείᾳ) in Rome (*Jos. AJ* 16.243).

³¹ For his birth date, cf. Kokkinos (1998) 209 n4.

³² Cichorius (1922) 317 concluded many years ago that N. was at the court of Alexandria in the 30s.