

## Exemplary Relativism in Cornelius Nepos' *On Foreign Generals*

The historical writing of Cornelius Nepos has been called “phenomenally inaccurate” (Rawson 49), and one type of error for which he is commonly criticized is a misunderstanding of the institutions of Greek cities. Twice, for example, Nepos says that the Athenians wasted money “because of the largess of their magistrates” (*largitione magistratum*; *Miltiades* 6.4, *Themistocles* 2.2), as if the magistrates and not the demos controlled expenditures (faulted by Nipperdey-Witte 41, 45; Rolfe 18). This paper will reevaluate this criticism by linking two strands in current Nepotian scholarship. In one strand, Nepos is seen to be creating links between his biographies that emphasize a republican interpretation of events and a normative and exemplary understanding of virtues (Dionisotti, Stem), while in another strand, he is found to be appealing to cultural relativism in order to engage his readers more perceptively in the comparative Greek-Roman project that structures the paired books of his biographical corpus (Titchener, Beneker). What Nepos’ exemplary discourse therefore requires, I argue, is the acceptance of cultural relativism and the rejection of moral relativism. The virtues have to be timeless (Roller 32-38), but the contexts that inculcate them variable, so that the reader can profitably compare the virtues of commanders from different eras and cultures. Nepos therefore collapses cultural difference in order to heighten exemplary relevance. His censure of Athenian magistrates for largess is indeed historically misleading, but positing *largitio* in Athens allows its deleterious effects to be compared to Rome (*Atticus* 6.2) or Carthage (*Hamilcar* 3.3).

The collapsing of cultural difference extends beyond political institutions. Nepos compares the habits of Alexander’s troops to “our veterans now” (*Eumenes* 8.1-3, note also 3.4), and when Miltiades besieges Paros in 489 BCE, he is said to bring his *vineae* and *testudines* up to the walls (*Miltiades* 7.2). Greek gods are Latinized so that Poseidon becomes Neptune

(*Pausanias* 4.4) and Athena becomes Minerva (*Agesilaus* 4.6). Even when Nepos describes how the Herms (*Hermae*) were vandalized in the midst of Athenian preparations for the Sicilian expedition in 415 BCE, he notes that the one that survived was called the Mercury of Andocides (*Mercurius Andocidi*; *Alcibiades* 3.2). Most strikingly, when Hannibal swears that he will never be a friend to the Romans, Nepos has him do so at an altar of Jupiter Optimus Maximus (*Hannibal* 2.3-4).

The character of Nepos' exemplary relativism also has much deeper effects. Consider how Nepos introduces Miltiades: he was the most distinguished man of his generation because of the antiquity of his family, the glory of his ancestors, and his own sense of restraint (*et antiquitate generis et gloria maiorum et sua modestia unus omnium maxime floreret*; 1.1). These are the criteria for success in public life in the late Roman Republic more than in archaic Athens; Herodotus 6.34-41 tells a much different story about Miltiades' family and early career. Likewise, when Nepos celebrates the *exemplum* of Agesilaus in obeying the summons home from his Persian campaign, he praises him, as he does Miltiades, for his restraint (*modestia*; *Agesilaus* 4.2). His attribution of that exemplary quality, moreover, results from his interpretation of his source, which in this instance is Xenophon's *Agesilaus* (1.36). The content of the two passages is similar enough to be confident that Xenophon's passage is Nepos' source, but the differences are illuminating. Xenophon has Agesilaus obey his city-state and refers to the Ephors by their number ("the five"), whereas Nepos deems him obedient to the magistrates (*magistratum*). Xenophon conceives of him, properly, standing in the Ephoreium, while Nepos renders him in the *comitium* at Sparta. Xenophon depicts him alone before the ephors, yet implicitly still as king, whereas Nepos imagines him as a private citizen (*privatus*), without any

royal prerogative. Nepos thus modifies the cultural context from Greek to Roman for the sake of advancing his comparative biographical project through exemplary relativism.

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