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Dionysius of Halicarnassus *On Imitation*

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ABSTRACT: This paper defends Usener's theory that the extract from Dionysius' *On Imitation* in the *Letter to Pompeius* is from an unfinished draft of the text which lies behind the epitome of *On Imitation*.

The survey of historians in Dionysius' *Letter to Gnaeus Pompeius* purports to be a transcription of part of the second book of his treatise *On Imitation*. This treatise has otherwise been preserved only in a fragmentary epitome; but there are discrepancies between the two sources, especially in their handling of the *πραγματικὸς τόπος*, which suggest that the transcription in the *Letter* was not in fact made from the same original as the epitome. In 1889 Usener suggested that the *Letter* reproduced a draft, the epitome the published version of the treatise.¹ More recently K.S. Sacks has argued that the *Letter* does not attempt to reproduce but substantially reworks *Imitation*, and that this reworking reflects significant changes in Dionysius' thinking on historiography.² I shall argue that Usener was right.

The first difference between the two sources is the most dramatic. The relevant section of the *Letter* begins with a comparison between Herodotus and Thucydides with respect to the *πραγματικὸς τόπος* that fills just over six pages in the Teubner edition of Usener and Radermacher (II 232.18-239.2); this corresponds to a single sentence in the epitome: 'As for the historians, Herodotus has executed the *πραγματικὸν εἶδος* better' (II 207.5-6). As Sacks sees (68), there are two possibilities; either the epitomator has cut out a large section of his original, or Dionysius did not include this comparison in the original from which the epitome was made. Since the comparison is found in the *Letter*, and Dionysius claims that the *Letter* reproduces *Imitation* (232.13-17), it is natural to infer that the epitomator was responsible for the omission.³ Sacks comments (68): 'The lone sentence on the *pragmatikon eidos* comes directly after the passage in the comic poets, where *pragmatikon* there also receives mere mention and the *lektikos topos* greater development'; but we cannot possibly determine the relationship of the epitome to its original by comparing one part of the epitome with another in this way. Sacks offers no compelling argument against the natural inference.

¹ *Dionysii Halicarnassensis de imitatione librorum reliquiae ab H. Usenero collectae* (Bonn 1889), 6: 'Mutuam sibi opem et epistula et epitoma ferunt. quod si quando desunt in epistula quae librariorum negligentia omitti minus est probabile, hoc tenendum erit, in epistula illud caput translatum esse ante quam totum opus perpolitum a scriptore emitteretur, epitomam non ex epistula sed ex opere perfecto excerptam.'

[**Additional note** (December 2007): I would now wish to modify my conclusions on this question in the light of the important discussion in Gavin Weaire, 'The relationship between Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *De imitatione* and *Epistula ad Pompeium*', *Classical Philology* 97 (2002), 351-9.]

² K.S. Sacks, 'Historiography in the rhetorical works of Dionysius of Halicarnassus', *Athenaeum* 60 (1983), 65-87.

³ An earlier section of the *Letter* is claimed to be transcribed from Dionysius' work on Attic orators (226.22-227.1); comparison with *Demosthenes* shows that this is true: there are only slight verbal differences.

There are, in fact, a number of clear indications that the epitomator has omitted material from his original here. First, the epitome says that Herodotus handles the *πραγματικὸς τόπος* ‘better’. The comparative suggests a comparison, and in the ensuing discussion of the *λεκτικὸς τόπος* we find that a *σύγκρισις* of Herodotus and Thucydides is indeed being conducted. But this is never formally introduced; Thucydides is not even named in the sentence on the *πραγματικὸς τόπος*. So something has been left out. Secondly, the *πραγματικὸς τόπος* is treated in greater detail when the epitome reaches the minor historians; but it would have been odd of Dionysius in *Imitation* to pass over this topic when discussing the two major historians but to develop it for the minor historians. Furthermore, the treatment of this topic in the minor historians makes frequent reference to the major historians. In the discussion of Philistus the epitome refers to Thucydides’ treatment of the *πραγματικὸς τόπος*—to the incompleteness of his *ὑπόθεσις* (208.17-19) and to his poor arrangement (208.19-209.1); this surely implies an original *Imitation* in which these points had already been established in a discussion of Thucydides. A similar conclusion is implied by the section on Xenophon in the epitome; here (208.3-5) the *πραγματικὸς τόπος* in Herodotus is recapitulated in greater detail than the epitome gives when it is concerned with Herodotus himself. These anomalies are easier to understand in notes taken for private use than in a formal treatise prepared for publication.

External evidence supports the conclusion to which these pointers direct us. At the beginning of his *Thucydides* Dionysius says that in *Imitation* he indicated *τίνας ἕκαστος αὐτῶν* (sc., the historians) *εἰσφέρει πραγματικὰς τε καὶ λεκτικὰς ἀρετάς*. This claim is not true of the epitome, in which the *πραγματικαὶ ἀρεταὶ* of the two most important historians are neglected; so the epitome must have omitted some part of *Imitation*. Admittedly Dionysius says that his discussion in *Imitation* was ‘brief’ (*ἐν ὀλίγοις*); and a few lines later he says specifically of his treatment of Thucydides that it was ‘concise and summary’ (*συντόμῳ τε καὶ κεφαλαιώδει γραφῇ*, cf. *κεφαλαιωδῶς* in the epitome, 211.8). But even this is untrue of the epitome, although it is true of the *Letter*, which by comparison with *Thucydides* is concise and summary. The conclusion seems inescapable, therefore, that the sentence on the *πραγματικὸν εἶδος* in the epitome has replaced a more extensive discussion in the original *Imitation*, and that the original discussion was, like that in the *Letter* a *σύγκρισις*. It is reasonable to infer, then, that the original discussion and that in the *Letter* were one and the same.

Some further points arise in the discussion of the minor historians. Sacks says (68) that the *Letter* uses the standard five headings of the *πραγματικὸς τόπος* for Xenophon and Philistus, while *Imitation* (he should, of course, have said the epitome) only has three. These three are *ὑπόθεσις*, *οἰκονομία* and *ἦθος*. Sacks is in doubt as to how to take *οἰκονομία*, but he ought not to be. The *Letter* refers to *ὑπόθεσις*, *οἰκονομία* and *ἦθος*, and subdivides *οἰκονομία* into three subheadings (beginning/ending, division and variety) to give five (241.15-19); the epitome has simply omitted the subdivision of *οἰκονομία*, a condensation plausibly attributable to the epitomator.

More interesting are the discrepancies which Sacks notes in the discussion of Philistus; these are the evidence on which he bases his claim that Dionysius has changed his mind. First, the epitome criticises Philistus for leaving his ὑπόθεσις incomplete, like Thucydides; ‘in the *Letter to Pompeius*, however, it is when Dionysius discusses Xenophon’s subjects that he notes that the subject of Thucydides’ work is incomplete...; more importantly, Dionysius does so in a manner that implies no criticism’ (69). Secondly, the epitome criticises Philistus’ servile ἥθος but admires Thucydides’ freedom; the *Letter* criticises Philistus in similar terms, though omitting the comparison with Thucydides, but elsewhere it is critical of Thucydides’ ἥθος. These discrepancies are real, but neither affords evidence that Dionysius has changed his mind. First, an adverse judgement of Thucydides’ incompleteness is to be found in the *Letter*, in the σύγκριστις of the major historians (236.1-5). Secondly, criticism of Thucydides’ anti-Athenian bias, such as we find in the *Letter*, is wholly consistent with praise of his freedom, such as we find in the epitome; both are to be found in *Thucydides* (cc. 8, 41; cf. Sacks 69 n.18). It is quite possible that the adverse comment found in the *Letter* is absent from the epitome simply because the whole σύγκριστις has been omitted. In neither case, therefore, is there any reason to conclude that Dionysius’ assessment of Thucydides has been revised. There is an important point here, even so. The omission of material from the *Letter* in the epitome is readily explained as the work of the epitomator; but the presence of additional material in the epitome is not.⁴ So the references to Thucydides’ incompleteness and to Thucydides’ ἥθος in the epitome’s account of Philistus do point to a difference between its original and that of the *Letter*, as Usener saw.⁵ We shall return to this point.

Sacks also points out (71) that the praise of Theopompus’ commitment to the profession of history in the *Letter* is missing in the epitome, and this he thinks ‘certainly new’; but without the obviously circular assumption that the epitome accurately reflects the contents of the original *Imitation* his certainty is unwarranted. The *Letter* is also more expansive on Theopompus’ παρρησία; Sacks comments: ‘Dionysius’ discussion here is clearly a revision of that found in *Mimesis*, for in the *Letter* the term *parresia* not used, nor does Dionysius discuss Theopompus’ talent for divining the motives of actions and speeches, but just those of actions.’ This has no force. The fact that the word παρρησία does not occur in the *Letter* is irrelevant, since it is a reasonable summary of Dionysius’ defence of Theopompus’ critical stance towards historical characters, such as might easily have occurred to the epitomator. The addition of the words καὶ λεχθέντων does not obviously go beyond the range of the epitomator’s rephrasing, but it may be a further instance of additional material in the epitome.

We may now return to the question of the epitome’s additional material. We have seen that the epitome’s account of Philistus contains such additions; it is also

⁴ It is possible in principle that the epitomator made the additions himself; but to cut down the σύγκριστις so radically implies a lack of interest in the πραγματικὸς τόπος, which makes additions elsewhere unlikely.

⁵ See n.1 above. It is possible that the preceding discussion of Xenophon’s faults with respect to τὸ πρόβλεπον would have been relevant here; the lacuna at 242.10 makes this uncertain, but the remains of the *Letter* at this point are not easily reconciled with the epitome.

differently ordered. In the *Letter* Dionysius says: Philistus is like Thucydides in his choice of ὑπόθεσις, his organisation and his lack of variety; and his ἥθος is bad. The epitome: Philistus is like Thucydides, not in ἥθος (he is servile, Thucydides is not), but in incompleteness and bad organisation. No inferences can safely be drawn from the absence of material in the epitome that is found in the *Letter* (the choice of ὑπόθεσις and the lack of variety) since it is possible that this is the result of epitomisation; but the additional material and the different order are significant. It is, I suggest, the order which points us to the correct solution. The order in which the points are made in the *Letter* is standard, and it is possible to misread the last point as a further similarity to Thucydides. The order in the epitome is unexpected, and the unwanted implication concerning Thucydides' ἥθος is explicitly removed. This does not suggest that the *Letter* is the more highly developed version of the material, as Sacks contends; rather, it supports Usener's conjecture that the *Letter* is a version of the epitome's source which had not received its final polish.

In the *Letter* Dionysius says that the third book of *Imitation* is incomplete (232.12-13); it is a reasonable inference that *Imitation* was still being written when the extract from it was transcribed for Pompeius,⁶ and in that case the supposition that the epitome reflects a revision for publication of the version of *Imitation* transcribed in the *Letter* is perfectly plausible.

⁶ But this is not of course certain: S.F. Bonner, *The Literary Treatises of Dionysius of Halicarnassus* (Cambridge 1939), 36-7 points out that the first two books may have been issued separately, and that there is no evidence to confirm that that the third book was ever completed.