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# Behind the *Lives* of *Philosophers*

## Reading Diogenes Laertius in the Western Middle Ages

### Abstract

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The classical learning of medieval readers, especially those fortunate to have access to a good library, could be formidable. But in the Middle Ages knowledge was also a commodity, and there was powerful temptation to satisfy intellectual hunger with compressed, simplified digests and easy fare. One text, *De vita et moribus philosophorum*, long attributed to Walter Burley, seems to have achieved particular success in satisfying that hunger for an easy version of ancient lore. Its roots reach back to Diogenes Laertius' Greek *Lives of the Philosophers*. This essay explores the roads of transmission that led to the making of *De vita et moribus philosophorum*, which fed a popular fascination with ancient philosophy and the lives of ancient philosophers. Through what channels did the 'history' of ancient philosophy find a readership beyond the scholarly academy, and how can we explain the appeal of such classical knowledge?

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The essays in this issue of *Interfaces* testify to the monumental work of Birger Munk Olsen, who has given to our generation and many to follow an atlas of medieval knowledge of the classical world. As Munk Olsen's scholarship on the copying and preservation of manuscripts of the Latin classics demonstrates, medieval interactions with the lore of classical antiquity were serious, not only deep but broad, ranging across the vast geographical spaces of Europe. The classical learning of medieval readers, especially those fortunate to have access to a good library, could be formidable. But just as today, so in the Middle Ages knowledge was also a commodity, and there was powerful temptation among the learned to satisfy intellectual hunger with compressed, simplified digests and easy fare. Of course, it was not just the academic learned who gravitated to knowledge about classical antiquity. For readers and audiences across the spectrum of learning, the lore of antiquity was a site of imaginative en-

gagement with a world that was at once alien and familiar, impossible to know and yet readily domesticated in moral *exempla* and narrative. Munk Olsen's research enables our understanding of these dimensions of medieval classicism as well, that is, the forms of self-understanding that the cultivation of antiquity provided. In this essay I explore part of that story of the medieval fascination with the classics: the popular appeal of ancient philosophy, or more precisely, the lives of ancient philosophers. Through what channels did the 'history' of ancient philosophy find a readership beyond the scholarly academy, and how do we map the lure of such classical knowledge?

I begin with an example from a school treatise from the fourteenth century that sprinkles its teaching with some confused and even fungible names of ancient philosophers.

Secundo eiam rethorialis sciencia dicitur ire et doloris fugatiua que consistit in verborum veritate ludicris parita. Ipse enim docet ornate loqui ioca serie admiscenda [...]. Vnde illud maxime commendat phylosophus propter rethoricam hiis insertam, videlicet socratem, salen, et soenocratem, qui propter rethoricalem scientiam optimum modum loquendi tacendi <que> pariter habuerunt. Socrates in quodam tempore constitutus in consilio principum audiens inuitatatem sermonum nolebat loqui; commotus autem princeps interrogauit eum cur taceret. Ipse autem socrates loquens ait: Sepius penituit me locutum fuisse, numquam vero tacuisse. Salen vero alio tempore interrogauit [sic] cur taceret vti stultus ac si mutus esset. Tunc ipse respondit: Stultorum est multum loqui. Soenocrates erat interrogatus cur loqui desisteret, numquid in ore defectum pateretur. Ipse autem ait: Natura michi tribuit vnum os et duos habeo aures, propter quod plus expedit me audire quam loqui. Hiis quidem respensionibus dictorum phylosophorum seu rethorum sic positis et datis ira et dolor principum mitigabatur, et eosdem phylosophos gratos principum consiliarios procreauit.

(The science of rhetoric is also said to drive away anger and melancholy, and this function lies in the truth of her words born from play. For rhetoric teaches to speak ornately, mixing jokes with earnest [...]. This the philosopher [Aristotle]

especially commended, because rhetoric was a quality of those great men, socrates salen et soenocrates [Socrates, Solon, and Xenocrates] who knew, because of rhetoric, both the best kind of speaking and of being quiet. Socrates was once at a council of princes, and hearing some useless talk, he did not want to speak; but the prince was irritated and asked him why he kept quiet. Socrates said: "I have often regretted that I spoke, but never that I was silent." At another time, Solon [was] asked why he was quiet as if he were a fool or a mute. Then he answered, "To talk a lot is the business of fools." Xenocrates was asked why he stopped speaking, whether he had some speech defect. He said, "Nature allotted me one mouth and I have two ears, on account of which it is more useful to me to listen than to speak." When philosophers and rhetoricians gave responses like these, the anger and melancholy of princes was assuaged, and [rhetoric] made the philosophers themselves the beloved counselors of princes.)<sup>1</sup>

1. Nicolaus Dybinus 118. This and the translations that follow are mine.

The copyist of this version of Nicholas Dybinus' lecture on rhetoric, the *Declaracio oracionis de Beata Dorothea*, which Dybinus composed (possibly in Vienna, possibly in Prague) around 1369, seems to have been confused by the names Solon and Xenocrates, although the stories told about them would have been fairly recognizable to most Latin and many vernacular readers. What might the student audience of Dybinus' lecture be expected to know about the multitude of Greek philosophers? Xenocrates, for example, is mentioned only once in passing in Augustine's *City of God*. The names, of course, can come down through various routes and in many guises (in the case of Xenocrates, references in Cicero, in Aristotle, and this kind of anecdote derived from Valerius Maximus, 7.2 ext. 6). But the anecdotal references in Dybinus' lecture suggest a particular kind of interest in classical antiquity, more congenial to the chatty, breezy, impressionistic life stories to be found in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers*. And that is the story that I want to explore here: how did Diogenes Laertius' Greek work, written in the second century CE, ever make it into the Latin West before the Renaissance, and what circuitous routes did it take? What forms of classicism or classical interest did its penetration and ultimate popularity invite? How can we distinguish the uses to which such biographical anecdotes about Greek philosophers and others were put, and what levels of audience for these materials can we imagine? And what textual histories of trans-

lations and *scholia*, often ambiguous and sometimes irretrievably lost to us, lie beneath the surface of this popularized classicism?

The transmission history that I present here is not previously unknown: various scholars, notably Mario Grignaschi, Tiziano Dorandi, Carlotta Dionisotti, and Thomas Ricklin have cleared away old misconceptions and furnished new perspectives on these texts. Their research, in turn, invites further exploration of this intriguing history of medieval familiarity with the ancient world.

Western medieval sapiential literature relied on many and varied collections for information about ancient words and deeds: collections of *dicta* and lives from the classical world, notably Valerius Maximus' *memorabilia*; Arabic collections drawing on Greek materials known in the Latin West through translations, notably the *Bocados de oro* (based on an Arabic source written in the eleventh century, and translated into Spanish in the mid-thirteenth century and into Latin by the 1290s, and then translated from Latin into French and English; Adrados 21–25, Parker); Alexander romances; moral *florilegia*; <sup>2</sup> and of course the *Secretum secretorum*, which attracted and pulled together information from multiple sources.<sup>3</sup> For highbrow histories of the philosophers, there is Augustine's *City of God* (taken up into Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* 8.6), and for individual schools of thought (the Stoics, the Skeptics) there are Ciceronian works and others (*Tusculan Disputations* and Seneca's letters for the Stoics; Cicero's *Academica* and Augustine's *Contra academicos* for the Skeptics), as well as the information to be gleaned from the writings of Aulus Gellius and later Macrobius. There were also the Christian historiographers, Eusebius, Jerome, and Orosius, who surveyed the ancient world.

But the arrival of a Latinized version of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers* represents a distinctively homegrown medieval product. The Latinized Diogenes was aimed especially at the curiosities of a newly broad stratum of readers. Modern scholarship (from the 1880s until the late 1980s) has also put its stamp on this transmission story, treating that Latin version with the greatest respect as a blockbuster publication success by a famous fourteenth-century Oxford don, until in 1990 that deception was rumbled by a distinguished Italian scholar.

The basic story that was accepted was that the English logician and theologian Walter Burley (d. 1344) had translated a portion of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives*, supplementing them with many other materials, in the work now known as *De vita et moribus philosophorum*,

2. For example, the *florilegia* edited by Delhaye and Talbot.

3. An excellent overview is Williams.

4. Prelog, “Die Handschriften” 1–18. About a quarter of this count includes a redaction: see Prelog, “Zur Bewertung” 166–67.

5. An additional source of the Italian and Catalan translations was the 1433 Latin translation of Diogenes Laertius by Ambrogio Traversari. See Monserrat Ferrer 681–95. The literature on Traversari’s translation is extensive: an introduction to it may be found in Pontone 14, 16–18, and *passim*. See also Ricklin 111–56, for further detail and references. On translations in Bohemia, see below.

6. Ricklin questions Grignaschi’s dating of the *terminus post quem*, suggesting as early a date as 1300 or even somewhat earlier (119).

edited in 1886 by the German Hispanist Hermann Knust, and reedited in an unpublished doctoral dissertation by John O. Stigall in 1956 (Knust 1886; Stigall, “The *De vita et moribus philosophorum*”). Knust’s edition also presents a fifteenth-century Spanish translation of the work alongside the Latin text. *De vita et moribus* survives in over 270 manuscripts, many from the first half of the fifteenth century, as well as in *incunabula* and early prints, with evidence of more that are no longer extant.<sup>4</sup> In the fifteenth century it was also translated into various vernaculars including Spanish, Italian, German, and Catalan.<sup>5</sup> Walter Burley’s name had been associated with the work in manuscript ascriptions from the fifteenth century. In the mid twentieth century, various scholars, notably Hubert Silvestre, expressed surprise at the preponderance of continental copies and the near-absence of any English manuscripts of the work, given that it was written by so prominent a figure in English intellectual history (Silvestre 255–59; Stigall, “The Manuscript Tradition” 49). In his edition of 1886, Knust had hypothesized that Burley perhaps conceived and produced this translation from Greek in order to instruct Edward Prince of Wales (the Black Prince, son of Edward III), and this hypothesis was repeated by Stigall. As late as 1985, in a valuable exploration of the ‘mobility’ of medieval sources in the history of philosophy, Gregorio Piaia also treats the work as a didactic effort on Burley’s part, as if it shares something of the pedagogical purpose of collections of *accessus ad auctores* or introductions to the authors (Knust 398; Stigall, “The Manuscript Tradition” 44). Across the board, serious scholars gave serious attention to *De vita et moribus* as a high-minded instructional treatise in the edifying tradition of John of Wales’ *Compendiloquium* as long as Burley’s name remained attached to it.

In 1990, the image of *De vita et moribus* suffered a terrible blow when Mario Grignaschi severed its connection with Walter Burley (Grignaschi, “Lo Pseudo Walter Burley” 131–90, and in the same volume “Corrigenda et addenda” 325–54). Grignaschi showed that the work had to have been composed in northern Italy, which had the resources in classical materials, and that – from the evidence of an anonymous work dated 1326 that made use of it – it had to have been made no later than the 1320s, perhaps even about 1310, that is, during a period long before Burley arrived in Bologna.<sup>6</sup> Overnight *De vita et moribus* was deprived of its glamorous Burleian associations with Oxford, Paris, high scholasticism, debates about realism, and the Plantagenet court, to be revealed as the work of an anonymous Ital-

ian who is now referred to – teasingly and cruelly – as the ‘Pseudo-Burley.’ How the work came to be attributed to Burley in fifteenth-century manuscripts is unclear, although the attribution stuck and was reaffirmed in early prints. Worse, Grignaschi argued that the work had a distinctly popularizing ambition, to make the more high-brow classicism of John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus*, John of Wales’ *Compendiloquium* and *Breviloquium*, and Vincent of Beauvais’ *Speculum historiale*, along with older sources such as Valerius Maximus’ *Memorabilia*, available to a wide public. Adding insult to injury, this was hack work, not the product of thoughtful pedagogical ruminations in the Oxford common rooms. The anonymous Italian was keen to get his work out there in a competitive literary market, so he worked quickly. To this end, to find lively, day-to-day pictures of the ancient philosophers, the Pseudo-Burley turned to that eminently chatty, anecdotal resource, long derided by classicists and philosophers, Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives*, and scooped out from it as much detail as suited his purpose, supplementing it with anything else to hand to expand his topic. Thus he lumps Pre-Socratics, Cynics, Sceptics, Epicureans, Academicians, and Stoics together almost indiscriminately with poets, dramatists, orators and sophists, physicians, historians, and grammarians, and he extends the coverage beyond Diogenes’ Hellenic limits to include various authors of Latin antiquity. Some of the gnomic material in the work is derived from the Arabic-Spanish-Latin *Bocados de oro*, notably in the chapter on Plato (Hasse 50–52; Ferrer 682.)

But how did this anonymous author get to Diogenes Laertius? How did he pry open the Greek of that text? This is the most fascinating part of the process. We owe the elaboration of the answer to certain scholars, especially Tiziano Dorandi, who persist in laboring in the unglamorous though richly rewarding fields of *Laertiana*. The Pseudo-Burley’s source for Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives* was a lost translation, made in or before the 1160s, by Henricus Aristippus.<sup>7</sup> We know nothing for certain of Aristippus’ birth; but he translated Plato’s *Meno* and *Phaedo*, was an archdeacon at Catania, was part of a royal delegation to Constantinople, and died in prison in Palermo in 1162. The only trace of his Diogenes Laertius is in the prologue to his translation of the *Meno*, where he states that he was preparing translations of Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives* and other texts but put these aside when a “beloved and revered” friend asked him to translate Plato:

7. Dorandi, “La versione latina.” A revised version of this article appears in Dorandi, *Laertiana* 201–28. The identity of Henricus Aristippus as an early translator of Diogenes Laertius was first proposed by Rose.

Iussu namque domini mei, gloriosissimi Siculorum regis Guilelmi, Gregorii Nazanzeni opuscula translaturus eram, qui eodem numero quo et Atheniensis Plato dictavit sermones. Rogatus item a Maione magno Sicilie admirabili atque ab Hugone Epanormitane sedis archipontifice Laertium Diogenem De vita et conversatione dogmatisque philosophorum in Ytalicas transvertere sillabas parabam. Quibus ad tempus postpositis tuo potius acquievi consilio. In quo manifestius ostenditur quam diligenter amicorum votis obeditur, propter quos nonnunquam dominorum iussum preteritur. Promptius enim agitur quidquid ex animo venit. (Kordeuter and Labowsky 5–6)

(At the command of my lord, the most glorious King William of Sicily, I was translating the works of Gregory of Nazianzus, whose compositions number the same as those of Plato of Athens. I was also engaged in translating Diogenes Laertius' *De vita et conversatione dogmatisque philosophorum* into Latin at the request of the grand admiral Maio of Sicily and Archbishop Hugo Panormitanus. When I accepted your suggestion, I set these things aside. Thus it is manifestly clear how diligently one obeys the wishes of friends, on account of whom one sometimes passes over the command of lords. Something that comes from the soul is accomplished with greater alacrity.)

The identity of this friend, whose desire for the philosophical enlightenment of Plato superseded the requests of powerful lords, remains unknown.<sup>8</sup>

8. In her introduction to the edition of Aristippus' *Meno*, Labowsky dismisses an earlier identification of the friend with Adelard of Bath as groundless (Kordeuter and Labowsky xii).

The translation of Diogenes that Aristippus began work on is also an uncertainty. The best case that can be made is that Aristippus perhaps translated books 1–5 of Diogenes' *Lives*, but that its circulation was extremely limited. Two later works, independent of each other, cite from books 1–5 of Diogenes: the *Compendium moralium notabilium* of Geremia da Montagnone (1285); and the *De vita et moribus* of the Pseudo-Burley (1317–20). Both had access to a version or versions of a latinized Diogenes, which would have been that of Aristippus, or related to it. Thus we trace our route from zero manuscripts remaining of the Latinized Diogenes Laertius books 1–5 by Aristippus to more than 270 extant manuscripts of the Pseudo-Burley's gnomic-biographical compilation!

The decisive undoing of the historical fiction of Burley's authorship of the Diogenes translation, and the exposing of the shadowy trails that led to the making of *De vita et moribus*, are not themselves without further complication. Nearly two decades after Grignaschi's revelations, Thomas Ricklin used the early interest of Geremia da Montagnone in Diogenes Laertius as evidence of another possible element in the transmission of Aristippus' translation. While the Pseudo-Burley regularly gives his source as "Laercius," Geremia calls his source "Cronica de nugis philosophorum," a name that echoes the subtitle of John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*: "de nugis curialium et vestigiis philosophorum," thus seeming to belong to an earlier identification of the Laertian *Lives* with moral and political philosophy (Ricklin 114–18). Does this mean that Aristippus' partial translation of the 1160's went through an intermediate revision before reaching the Pseudo-Burley some time between 1300 and 1320, or indeed that the Pseudo-Burley was the beneficiary of a small groundswell of interest in the Laertian text? These questions cannot be answered with confidence, but we do know that the Pseudo-Burley's reception of Aristippus was to change the face of ancient philosophy in the Latin Middle Ages, making especially the earliest Greek philosophers, from Thales to Xenophon, into personalities knowable through their biographies.<sup>9</sup>

9. Cf. Ricklin 120: "Erst durch ps. Burleys Arbeit an und mit Diogenes Laertios wird dieser zu einer integrierten Stimme der lateinischen Welt, wobei diese neue Stimme die sie absorbierende Kultur notgedrungen in dem Rahmen modifiziert ... [M]odifiziert der neue Text nicht nur das Ensemble der in der lateinischen Welt nunmehr vorstellbaren Figuren der Philosophie, auch die von Diogenes Laertios gestalteten Philosophen selbst gewinnen durch ps. Burley im Moment ihres Eintritts in die lateinische Kultur eine neue Physiognomie." Jan Prelog makes a related point about the impact of the Pseudo-Burley on the very image of the philosopher ("De Pictagora Phylosopho" 191–252).

10. See Labowsky in Kordeuter and Labowsky xi: "Vir igitur fuit Aristippus ingenii et studiorum varietate excellens."

Aristippus does not tell us how he felt about Diogenes Laertius, but he does exclaim about the "balsamic scent" of Plato who "made Attic mores and wisdom illustrious" (Kordeuter and Labowsky 5), and he was happy enough to set aside Diogenes Laertius and put off his powerful patrons while he acceded to his friend's request for a translation of Plato. We might imagine that for Aristippus, translating Diogenes Laertius was a task he undertook to please his superiors, while translating Plato was a labor of love. The historical record gives us good evidence of the breadth and excellence of Aristippus' learning, and his philosophical ambitions as a translator of Plato were accordingly very high.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that the value he placed on Greek philosophy fed at least some curiosity about the biographical information supplied by Diogenes Laertius. The Pseudo-Burley, by contrast, sets his philosophical ambitions programmatically low. But this quality can also explain the extraordinary appeal of the work.

To give a picture of how the Pseudo-Burley's *De vita* works and what seems to account for its vast popularity, I offer one of the shorter entries in its entirety, the chapter on Xenophon:



Xenophon, philosophus atheniensis, Socratis discipulus, in Grecia claruit necnon et in curia Ciri regis persarum cuius amicus fuit. Hic, ut ait Laercius, fuit verecundus et speciosissimus vir politicus probus et gratus. Ediditque libros circiter quadragenos de diversis naturis rerum et de arte militari et de venatica arte et de regimine equorum in quibus valde exercitatus fuerat et commenta multa primusque historias philosophorum scripsit. Vocabatur autem a multis “musa” propter leporem interpretacionis, quamobrem sibi invicem emulabantur ipse et Plato. Erat autem Xenophon eloquentissimus. Agellius de Xenophonte sic ait: Cum quidam ei malediceret sic respondit: “Tu studium tuum ad maledicendum dedisti, ego vero, consciencia teste, didici maledicta contempnere.” Hic, ut narrat Valerius libro V, cum sacrificaret diis coronam habens in capite maiorem ex duobus filiis suis in prelio periisse cognovit, nec ideo cultum deorum dimitendum putavit, sed tantummodo coronam de capite deponere contentus fuit. Percunctatus autem quo modo filius suus cecidisset, ut audivit fortissime pugnantem interiisse, iterum coronam capiti reposuit, numina quibus sacrificabat testatus maiorem se de virtute filii voluptatem quam ex morte sensisse amaritudinem. Vixit autem Xenophon annis LXXXIX et obiit in Corintho. Clarvit vero tempore Ciri regis persarum. (Knust 150; revised edition Bywater 14–15)

(Xenophon, a philosopher of Athens and student of Socrates, flourished in Greece and also in the court of Cyrus king of the Persians, whose friend he was. As Laertius says, he was modest and very handsome, an honest and worthy man and a skillful tactician. He published about forty books on the diverse natures of things, on warfare, hunting, and horsemanship (in which matters he was immensely skilled), and many collections, and he was the first to write histories of the philosophers. By many he was called “muse” on account of the beauty of his narrative style, for which reason he and Plato were in competition with each other. But Xenophon was most eloquent. Aulus Gellius said of Xenophon that when someone slandered him he responded “You have dedicated your careful effort to slander, but (on my conscience) I have worked to disdain slander.” As Valerius says in book 5 [of the *Memorabilia*], when Xenophon was making

sacrifices to the gods wearing a coronet on his head, he learned that the elder of his two sons had perished in battle; he thought that he should not abandon his religious devotions, but he was ready to remove the coronet from his head. Inquiring how his son died, he heard that he had perished most bravely in battle; he put the coronet back on his head and declared before the gods to whom he was sacrificing that he derived more joy from the courage of his son than bitter sorrow from his death. Xenophon lived 89 years and died in Corinth. He flourished during the time of Cyrus king of the Persians.)

This entry exemplifies the Pseudo-Burley's strategies. The first half of it is taken from the translation of Diogenes Laertius, compressing what was a relatively extensive account in the Laertian original to a few memorable details. It supplements these with moralizing matter descended from Aulus Gellius and Valerius Maximus (5.10 ext. 2), but probably derived by way of John of Salisbury, Vincent of Beauvais, and John of Wales. The biographical detail given in Diogenes is particularly rich because Xenophon is a well-known and well-attested figure. But the Pseudo-Burley reduces that down (either by choice or because his now-lost source had already edited the original). Having drawn a strong portrait of the man – friend of Cyrus, disciple of Socrates; modest and very handsome; an honest, worthy man and a skillful tactician; a productive author who also wrote the first history of philosophy and who was sufficiently honored by his contemporaries to be a rival to Plato – the Pseudo-Burley leaves this detail behind to give a few *dicta* harvested from Vincent of Beauvais and possibly others (citing Aulus Gellius and Valerius Maximus). These *dicta*, well-circulated in medieval moralizing collections, are intended to showcase the character of the man, and that is their role here too.

But as much as Valerius Maximus (directly or indirectly) supplied moralizing material to medieval gnomonic compilations, the structure of Valerius' *memorabilia* is thematic, to illustrate moral ideas through *exempla* and *dicta*. This is fundamentally the structure also followed by John of Wales in his *Compendiloquium*, where philosophers are seen as models of good living, and thus biography is used to supplement philosophy (Swanson 167–200).<sup>11</sup> This is also comparable with John of Salisbury's method in the *Policraticus*, where the imperative is to understand the development of philosophy by outlining the lineages of schools of thought (John's model is

11. An electronic text of the 1655 edition from Rome is available [online](#). This text, however, is an imperfect substitute for a new edition.

12. On knowledge of the ancient skeptics in the twelfth century (primarily Cicero's *Academica* and Augustine's *Contra academicos*) see Lagerlund; Grellard.

13. For example, in book 3, chapters 68 and 69, on Diogenes the Cynic, he cites not only Valerius Maximus, but Eusebius, Augustine, Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, Tertullian, Jerome, and Fulgentius the Mythographer, as well as his common source, Hélinand's *Chronicon* (Vincent of Beauvais 4:108).

Augustine's *City of God*). John's chapters on academic skepticism, where he contrasts the Academics with the Stoics and the Epicureans, do as much as they can, with the resources that he had at his disposal, to explain the nature and the philosophical subjects of doubt (John of Salisbury book 7, chapters 1–8).<sup>12</sup> We might also make a comparison with the method of Vincent of Beauvais in the *Speculum historiale*, where the aim is to incorporate the history of philosophy into a larger historical narrative, and where the interest in biographical detail will give way to illustrating philosophical outlooks. These in their own ways are high minded productions. John of Wales, for example, incorporates whatever Greek scholarship was available, including quarrying Grosseteste's *Ethics* (Dionisotti 349). The line-up of authorities cited in Vincent of Beauvais *Speculum historiale* is impressive, including those late antique historians and philosophers who were still in contact with Greek culture (Eusebius, Orosius, Jerome, Macrobius).<sup>13</sup>

Such interests are not the same as those of the Pseudo-Burley's *De vita*, even if the latter shares some features with its high-brow kin, such as the tendency towards novelistic narrative that we also see in Vincent of Beauvais (Piaia 123). When Vincent of Beauvais, however, incorporates life narratives, it is as a compiler using everything that might be useful. By contrast, the Pseudo-Burley opts for storytelling. And so the question to my mind is why the intellectual, political, and literary history of (mainly) Greek antiquity held such fascination for general audiences, as witnessed by the many manuscripts of the *De vita*. If the material compiled by the Pseudo-Burley did not attempt an intellectual history, if the lives of the philosophers are mainly lives without much philosophy to accompany them, what accounts for the interest in this? (For example, from the entry on Carneades [Knust 212–14], one would never know that he represents a school of skepticism, although it should be admitted as well that neither Diogenes Laertius nor Valerius Maximus is especially helpful here.) Is it driven by an interest in philosophy or by an interest in the idea of philosophers doing philosophy? Did this work supplement other, more scholarly interests, or did it have an appeal independent of deeper classical knowledge? If the latter, what was that appeal, and why the shaping around biography rather than the thematic shape of moral exemplification that was already available through such sources as John of Wales?

We can chart a course towards some answers by comparing the Pseudo-Burley with Robert Grosseteste's translations from selec-

14. Dionisotti 342–44. Grosseteste's translations have now been partially edited by Dorandi and Trizio (available [online](#)).

tions of the Byzantine *Suda*. The *Suda* is a massive lexical encyclopedia from the tenth century with many biographical articles about figures from Greek history, both pagan and Christian. It has some significant overlap with Diogenes Laertius' *Lives*, which was one of its sources. Its origins are unclear, although it seems to have been largely generated out of early *scholia* which are not all traceable in their entirety. It is hardly likely that the whole *Suda* would have been known in the Latin West, and thus Grosseteste's access to the text would only have been partial. Carlotta Dionisotti has examined his translations from the *Suda* (seventy one entries in all), noting that the majority of them are biographical, including historical rulers and mythological figures; but the largest category of these biographical entries consists of pagan philosophers, as well as a few poets and scientists. Grosseteste's translation was not circulated, but seems to have remained within Grosseteste's Franciscan convent in Oxford. It survives in fragments in two manuscripts, and was probably not intended for diffusion.<sup>14</sup> Rather, the work seems to have been undertaken for private use, as if Grosseteste were keeping a notebook or perhaps compiling some exercises in translation from Greek. Indeed, as Dionisotti suggests, Grosseteste's historical interests run counter to the current of thirteenth-century university studies, where historicism gave way to purer philosophical speculation (Dionisotti 344). And as I have noted here, the influential gnomic collections such as John of Wales' *Compendiloquium* stress wisdom over biography and thematic over historical organization. In this context, where we watch a slippage in academic values from biography to moral and philosophical speculation, it is also worth re-emphasizing that the original translation of Diogenes Laertius' biographies by Aristippus was so limited in its circulation that it is now lost. The interest of academic audiences in biographical matter was on the downward slope in the years after Aristippus' translation. Grosseteste's biographical translations from the *Suda* might have had a certain mnemonic usefulness for private study, or might have supplied mental glosses for unfamiliar Greek names that come up in Aristotle's texts. But the professional philosopher's interest in the history of his subject became at best something of a closet pursuit.

When the Pseudo-Burley's *De vita* was thought to be by Burley himself, scholars seemed to be aware of the implausibility of its academic appeal in an era in which professional intellectuals were not known for an interest in the historical detail of philosophy. Thus modern scholars approached it with a variety of explanations for its

creation and almost immediate popularity, including that Burley wanted to provide his students with a handy set of *accessus* or introductions to the philosophers. Can a comparable explanation still hold even if we take away Burley and that specific academic context? Perhaps there is an inherent general appeal to the *accessus* format, biographical nuggets attached to wise and exemplary *dicta*. More importantly, what might be the inherent appeal of the biographical structure, the entries organized according to the names of the figures (like an *accessus* collection) rather than according to the themes their *dicta* might yield?

My sense is that the popularity of the Pseudo-Burley's *De vita* is not to be explained simply as an epiphenomenon of the vast and often popular circulation of sapiential literature (the *Secretum secretorum*, the Alexander romances, the mirrors for princes, the *Bocados de oro*, and other vernacular and Latin translations from Arabic-Greek sources), although its rationales certainly intersect with some of these, and must to some extent have traveled with them. On the second point, we could hypothesize that even Henricus Aristippus, the intellectually accomplished Sicilian of the twelfth century, welcomed the order to translate Diogenes Laertius' *Lives* because he knew that Arabic sapiential literature often drew on this Greek source. But the popularity of the Pseudo-Burley's *De vita et moribus* must also reflect something else independent of edifying sapiential literature that might be used as sources for preaching. That motive seems to be sheer fascination with the classical world among various audiences: academically-trained readers, aristocratic readers, urban professionals, clergy.

In manuscripts it appears sometimes on its own and sometimes with other works of different kinds. On its own, it can bear the marks of private reading, such as the copy, now London, British Library (BL), Arundel 397, which was owned by the Franciscan Hugolino, bishop of Faenza, in the fourteenth century. In this copy, the titles of Aristotle's works are written out as a list, in columns (fols. 10r–v), as if to provide a quick and useful reference, even for a learned ecclesiastical reader. In another stand-alone copy of Italian provenance, written in 1423 (London, BL, Add. 24662), a reader has annotated interesting details, such as that the daughter of Cleobulus was the inventor of an enigma (f. 3r). Other copies were clearly made as luxury items.<sup>15</sup>

When it appears in a manuscript with other texts, we have different evidence to judge its readership. On one extreme of the reader-

15. For example, London, BL, Add. 15405 (s. xv), a humanist manuscript with illuminations and an index at the end with each famous name and the folio number.

ship spectrum we can point to a philosophical-scientific compilation, now London, BL, Harley 3234, which was acquired around 1440 by the humanist Giovanni Marcanova, a doctor of medicine at Padua, who donated it to the Augustinian convent of San Giovanni di Verdara, Padua. The collection also contains Alan of Lille's *De planctu Naturae*, Bernardus Silvestris' *Cosmographia*, Ovid's *Ex Ponto*, and the Pseudo-Senecan *De remediis fortuitorum*. This might represent one high end of professional learned interest: the Pseudo-Burley's *De vita* might supplement the classicizing scientific works in the collection (Alan of Lille, Bernardus Silvestris), or it might have been read as auxiliary to the Senecan moral philosophy or the consolatory themes of *Ex Ponto*. The spirit of Aristippus' own learning seems to be immanent to this kind of compilation: here *De vita et moribus* serves as a congenial augmentation of a program of classical and philosophical study.

On the other end of the spectrum, the text surfaces in pastoral and popular contexts, which point to other kinds of interest. For example, on the pastoral side, *De vita et moribus* appears in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France lat. 13475 (s. xv), a compilation of moral-homiletic materials from the north of France. Here *De vita et moribus* is joined by the *Sertum florum*, which was assembled by the Cistercian Simon de Vauluisant as a collection of literary *exempla* for preaching, Nicholas Trevet's *Seneca declamationes ad moralitatem reducte*, and the *De naturis gemmarum (De lapidibus)* by Marbod of Rennes.<sup>16</sup> This can suggest that *De vita* was mined for dicta to be used in sermons, just as works on scientific subjects (Marbod's *De lapidibus*), and moral philosophy or politics (for example, Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum*) served preaching purposes.<sup>17</sup> On the extreme end of this side of the spectrum, the text appears in popular collections of history and travel, where it is found among such works as the *Descriptio itineris in orientem* (Prague, Metropolitaní Kapitoly G XLII, s. XIV) and Marco Polo's travel narrative (Prague, Metropolitaní Kapitoly G XXI, s. xv) (Stigall, "The Manuscript Tradition" 51). There was a concentrated reception of the work in Bohemia, perhaps because a copy was acquired for Charles IV. It was here that an abbreviated redaction in simplified Latin style was made sometime in the later fourteenth century, along with a number of Czech translations.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond its placement in manuscript compilations, the uses to which the stories in *De vita et moribus* were put can tell us something about their general value. Even in school and university set-

16. On this manuscript as a homiletic collection, see Berlioz 358; Falmagne 219–20. Its provenance may possibly have been the Cistercian Collège St Bernard in Paris (Bondeelle-Souchier 248).

17. On the uses of Giles' *De regimine* as a preaching aid as evidenced by its presence in pastoral compilations (here manuscripts of English provenance) see Briggs 50–51.

18. Vidmanová; on the Czech translations, see 256 and note.

19. Ryba 51; cf. Knust 20. In line with a rather literary custom, the names of ancient philosophers are bestowed on many of the participants in these exercises, according to the opinions or exemplary stories (often derived from the Pseudo-Burley) which they are voicing; see *Quodlibet* (Ryba xxiv, and for examples, *passim*).

20. Knust 108–42 (Socrates) and 12–22 (Solon).

21. This is not yet edited (Sabbadini 839–40; Ross).

tings, the uses of *De vita et moribus* are not profoundly scientific or philosophical, but exemplary, to personify a pronouncement or attach a proverb or snippet of wisdom to a classical authority. The *quodlibetales* associated with the teaching of Jan Hus at Prague in the early fifteenth century regularly call upon the exemplary sayings of ancient philosophers reported in *De vita et moribus* to lend historical ‘color’ to a question, objection, or determination.<sup>19</sup> To the question “whether a prudent ruler, subordinate to the laws of the supreme Ruler, ought to surpass his subordinates in wisdom and virtue,” the first positive argument invokes the Laertian example of Solon, paraphrasing one of Solon’s wise sayings about good rule, as recorded in the Pseudo-Burley. Thus it is also not surprising that the anecdotes in the rhetorical treatise by Nicolaus Dybinus, with which I began, especially the stories attached to Socrates and Solon, are closely related to the Laertian chapters on those figures in *De vita et moribus*.<sup>20</sup> The Pseudo-Burley’s biographies are ideal sources for pedagogical *exempla*, and the text was mined for such material. Like Hus’ *quodlibetales*, Dybinus’ lectures on rhetoric do not primarily set out to teach moral examples of the philosophers’ lives, nor are they explicitly concerned with ancient lore on its own terms. The absorption of the text into disparate and unrelated contexts, such as Dybinus’ teaching of rhetorical technique, or its presence in compilations of works on history and travel (as in the examples of the Bohemian manuscripts), or in the *quodlibetales* at Prague, suggests that the Pseudo-Burley’s biographical vignettes supplied a much more general market for imaginative encounters with antiquity. For students in schools and universities, the ancient names seem also to have a mnemonic value to drive home a teaching or the form of an exercise.

These examples are garnered from the Bohemian popularity of the work, but the work’s impact is not limited to Central Europe. Another valuable example of its reach comes from the Avignon curia, where the Dominican Giovanni Colonna, an associate of Petrarch, wrote his *De viris illustribus* during the 1330’s. Colonna’s contribution to the genre of ‘great lives’ is visibly dependent on the Pseudo-Burley’s text, which he cites by title, “de moribus et vita philosophorum.”<sup>21</sup> The Pseudo-Burley also finds its way into another *De viris illustribus*, nearly contemporary with that of Colonna, and probably related to it, this one by Guglielmo da Pastrengo from Verona, another friend and correspondent of Petrarch (Guglielmo da Pastrengo). These two texts express a late medieval interest in history as biography, a universalist historicism expanding beyond the limits of

the Pseudo-Burley, but like their common predecessor, trying to grasp the classical world through the accessibility of lives and acts (Ricklin 125; Witt 284–85). Pastrengo envisioned his condensed biographies as a bulwark against the loss of ancient texts. While the works by Colonna and Pastrengo constitute a background for Petrarch's own historicism, Petrarch was to move his interests towards other, more profound historiographical ambitions (Witt 285–89).

The various audiences that consumed history and historical romance, sapiential literature such as the *Bocados de ora* or the protean *Secretum secretorum*, travel writing, science and philosophy, moral-pastoral literature, and biography, also read the Pseudo-Burley's *De vita et moribus*, although not, I believe, for exactly the same reasons. The appeal of the work seems to have lain in its popularized classicism, a kind of History Channel for latinate audiences that then found a number of vernacular outlets (Spanish and Catalan, German, French, Czech). Such a middlebrow compilation could sit comfortably alongside of learned classicism, but could also substitute for it.<sup>22</sup> In this it is not exactly a pedagogical tool, like collections of *accessus*, but it fills a related function, an inventory of classical authorities and their works that could precede study, accompany study, help to recall past study, or serve as a surrogate for study. Such classicism is common ground for different levels of audience: those who have read and studied most of the available classical philosophers and thinkers and who want to remember their reading, those who want to use their reading instrumentally for homiletic purposes, and those who have never read such classical authorities but feel that they ought to have a take on them. Through the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, moreover, the Pseudo-Burley's *De vita et moribus* could have served as a convenient and accessible source of collected information about various Greek philosophers whose ideas or works were not yet assimilated in the Latin West. Yet for other readers it seems to have fed an interest in exotic history, the 'other world' of ancient learning, just as the travels of Marco Polo spoke to interests in exotic contemporary locales.<sup>23</sup>

The novelistic character of Diogenes Laertius as captured and digested by the Pseudo-Burley may travel a parallel course with the Alexander romances and other classical stories, but it seems to fill a different purpose: to provide, not the literary enjoyment of complicated plots and exotic locales, but the gratification of easy conversational reference. This is the kind of material that lurks behind the façade of medieval classicism, plundered for sermons and school lectures

22. A telling example is Boccaccio's use of the Pseudo-Burley to explain Dante's reference (*Inferno* 4.137) to the presocratic philosopher Thales (Ricklin 126–27).

23. This principle – interest in antiquity as a spur to contemporary geographical and cultural curiosity – in literary contexts, is explored in literary terms by Minnis (413–34).



such as Dybinus' rhetorical treatise and Hus' *quodlibetales*. For some, the Pseudo-Burley's *De vita et moribus* would be an aspirational resource, for others a convenient repository and reminder of already-acquired knowledge. For its large and responsive late-medieval public, it served as a convenient road map to the still largely unknown terrain of Greek antiquity, otherwise known only by its reflections in classical Latin sources; through its transmission we can map some of the key intersections between Greek, Arabic, Latin, and European vernaculars.

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