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The Epitome – Passive Copying or a Creative Reinterpretation of the Abridged Text

Abstract: Epitomes are often viewed as passive abridgements of major works. In practice, the situation is much more complex. The extant epitomes may include some pieces of information that are absent in the original source works. On this account, drawing conclusions on the source as based on its epitome can be very misleading.

Key words: epitome, Late Antique historiography, breviarium

Perhaps the most important thing that scholars involved in researching epitomes[1] are confronted with is the problem to what extent the works under investigation reflect the sense of the compositions they abridge. In this article, I shall look into the question of the degree in which an epitome can be regarded as a faithful rendition of the sense of the shortened work and how much can it possibly complement that work. In a majority of cases, of course, it is not possible to answer this question, because either the main work or an epitome (or both) was lost. There is only a handful of cases where anything more could be said. Describing an epitome which Dionysios of Halicarnassus made of his own work, Photius stressed the fact that it was cleared of digressions. For each epitome, the key issue is which items of information were copied and which omitted by the epitome author. In his preface to the *Epitome* of the *Divinae Institutiones*, Lactantius mentions the difficulty of putting into one volume of everything he demonstrated in seven. He notes that such an undertaking may

[1] In this article I do not present the meaning and origin of the term epitome. See: H. Bott 1920; M. Galdi 1922.

result in a less clear argument due to abbreviations in argumentation as well as omissions of many pieces of evidence and examples. The author declares that he shall write in such a way as to preserve the clarity of his work.[2]

It is very often thought that epitomes tend to comprise approximately 10–50% of the information contained in the work proper. For example, the 2 Maccabees is an epitome from the five-volume work by Jason of Cyrene.[3] In this case, however, it is not known if one book of Jason's work would comprise just as much material as the Biblical book. The situation is similar in other cases, when we do know the number of volumes of both the abridged work and its epitome. Thus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus wrote an epitome of five books out of his 20-volume *Rhōmaikē archaiologia*[4] and *Oreibasios epitomized his work of 70 volumes entitled Iatrikai synagogai* into nine books known as *Synopsis pros Eusthation*.[5]

One of the noteworthy cases is Florus, who composed a brief history of Rome from the origins to the year 9. The extant manuscripts suggest that his work is an epitome of *Ab Urbe Condita* by Livy.[6] The oldest of the 189 manuscripts[7] of Florus, Bambergensis E III 22 (B) from the 9th century, is entitled *De Tito Livio bellorum omnium annorum septigentorum libri duo*.[8] In some other manuscripts (e.g., Palatinus (N)), it reads *L. Annaei Flori Epitoma de Tito Livio*.[9] In as much as according to the authors of the manuscripts, the work of Florus was an epitome of Livy, there are considerable differences between the two.[10] The authors depicted the methods of the functioning of the state differently. In Livy, outstanding individuals lead the growth of the state, while Florus

[2] Lact. Epit. Praef.

[3] 2 Maccabees 2:23–24. About Structure *2 Maccabees* See: B. Herr 2009, p. 1–31.

[4] Phot. Cod. 84.

[5] Phot. Cod 218.

[6] Many scholars were convinced of a simple relation between Livy and Florus. For instance, R. Syme referred to Florus as "Condensed Livy" (R. Syme, 1958, p. 503), even though some of the authors believed that the original title of Florus' work was different and did not indicate that it was an epitome. Apart from the title *De Tito Livio bellorum omnium annorum septigentorum libri duo*, manuscripts also bear titles such as *Lucii Annei Flori incipit epithoma de Tito Liuio qui historiam Romanam ab urbe condita sc*, *compendiosus historicus*, *Lucii Annei Flori liber primus incipit*, and *Lucii Annei* (or *Agnei*) *Flori continentie librorum quattuorfactorum memorabilium ab urbe condita usque ad tempora Caesaris Augusti secundi imperatoris liber primus incipit,* and also *Anacephaleosis Lucii Annei Flori librorum quattuor factorum memorabilium ab urbe condita usque ad tempora Caesaris Augusti secundi imperatoris* (M.D. Reeve, 1991, p. 478). As can be seen, not all of these titles include the word "epitome," so it is not certain whether the specific title was given by Florus himself or was provided by some other copyist. An argument against the presence of the term "epitome" in the title of Florus' work is reportedly his use of some sources other than Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* (P. Jal, 1967, p. 22). It is pointed out that Iuvenalis alludes to a work entitled *Tabella*, perhaps in reference to Florus (P. Jal, 1967, p. 22–23). On the other hand, Malalas regarded Florus as the author of the epitome. It seems that there is no obstacle to seeing Florus' composition as an epitome and the title suggesting the abridgement of Livy's work may be authentic (I. Lewandowski 1973, p. 6).

[7] M.D. Reeve, 1991, p. 453.

[8] P. Jal 1967, p. 21. The manuscript was written in the 9th century. On this manuscript, see P. Jal, 1967, p. 115–116.

[9] On this manuscript, see P. Jal, 1967, p. 120.

[10] P. Jal, 1967, p. 24–29.

gives precedence to Roman society, which is placed between the *Virtus* and the Fortune. He likened the Roman state to the stages of human development, where the royal period would be represented by childhood, the period from the foundation of the Republic to the supremacy over Italy – by adolescence, the next 200 years, up to the time of Caesar and Augustus – by maturity, while the period of the reign of the Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasties is likened to old age. At the same time, Florus had an optimistic outlook on the world, as the Roman state under Trajan gained a new strength.[11] It is possible that in his account of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, Florus was also inspired by Lucan's *Farsalia*.[12] There are also some other minor differences between these works. A different account of the fate of Aepulo, king of the Histriani, is also noted.[13] As Florus reports, he was taken captive after the feast and revelling that had taken place following the Histriani capture of consul Cn. Manlius' camp. Aepulo fell off the horse amid the combat, when the Histriani were attacked by the Romans and he was then taken prisoner, not really conscious of where he found himself.[14] Livy, on the other hand, depicts the fate of the Histrian ruler differently. He does mention the revelling of the Histriani and the Roman counterattack that resulted in the deaths of 8,000 drunk and sleeping men. The king himself managed to escape,[15] but his fate would be sealed soon afterwards. He committed suicide in Nesattium, where he took refuge, when the Roman troops stormed and seized the city.[16] Some discrepancies can be found also in the account of the fate of Bituitus, king of the Arverni.[17] According to Florus, he was made to participate in the Roman triumph as a captive.[18] In any event, Florus would certainly complement the details drawn from Livy with the information found in other sources.[19]

The title *Epitome de Caesaribus* is a modern one,[20] but the manuscripts preserve the name of this work. Among the 19 extant manuscripts, the most frequently encountered title is *Libellus de vita et moribus imperatorum breviatus ex libri Sextii Aurelii Victori a Cesare Augusto usque ad Theodosium*.[21] It suggests that the composition is a breviarium written on the basis of the *Liber de Caesaribus* by Aurelius Victor, although it must be noted that the *Epitome de Caesaribus* is not an epitome of Aurelius Victor's work. His *Liber de Caesaribus* concludes with an account of the 23rd year of Constantius II's reign,[22] which

[11] Florus, Praef. 4–8.
[12] M. Hose, 1994, p. 138; M. Leigh, 2007, p. 492.
[13] P. Jal, 1967, p. 26.
[14] Flor. I 26, 3.
[15] Liv. XLI 4, 7.
[16] Liv. XLI 11, 6.
[17] P. Jal, 1967, p. 26–27.
[18] Flor. I 37, 5.
[19] P. Jal, 1967, p. 29–32.
[20] In 1579, Andreas Scholl provided the title *Sex. Aurel. Victoris Epitome*. Arntzen's edition of 1733 is entitled *Sexti Aurelii Victoris Epitome de Caesaribus*, which is still in use to this day; see M. Festy, 1999, p. 8–9.
[21] M. Festy, 1999, p. 8.
[22] Aur. Vict. Caes. 42, 20.

would mean that Aurelius Victor finished his work in the year 360 or in early 361, while the *Epitome de Caesaribus* reaches up to the death and burial of Theodosius I, i.e., his narrative covers 34 years more than that of Aurelius Victor.[23] The *Epitome de Caesaribus* mentions many details not known from Aurelius Victor's *Liber de Caesaribus*, and sometimes absent in other sources. For instance, he claims that some people pronounced Tiberius' name mockingly as Caldius Biberius Mero;[24] a phoenix was sighted during Claudius' reign;[25] refers to Galba's passion for young men and enumerates the ruler's counsels;[26] a crow foretold Trajan's reign with the words καλῶς ἔσται;[27] empress Sabina was driven to suicide by Hadrian's insults and she publicly said that she made sure she avoided pregnancy when she realized the true nature of her husband;[28] Hadrian was afflicted by a subcutaneous disease;[29] after Aemilianus' death, the bridge where he was assassinated was called the *Pons sanguinarius*;[30] Valerian had the nickname Colobrius;[31] Claudius II defeated the Alemanni in a battle on the Lake Garda (Benacus);[32] Pomponius Bassus was the *princeps* of the Senate under Claudius II;[33] Carinus had his school mates executed because they once made fun of him,[34] Diocletian refused to return to power, as he preferred growing vegetables.[35] As can be seen, the author of the *Epitome de Caesaribus* must have certainly used also some sources other than Aurelius Victor.

Although the *Historiae Philippicae et Totius Mundi Origines et Terrae Situs* by Pompeius Trogus is lost[36], we have a surviving extract of his 44-volume work written by Justinus during his stay in Rome.[37] The author of this extract makes it known that he drew what, as he believed, was worth reading of and omitted everything that was of no interest or could not serve as an educating example.[38] He compared his work to a bouquet of flowers from which those who knew Greek could refresh their knowledge, while those who did not could use it as a learning aid.[39] What Justinus omitted from the main source can be seen by looking into the prologues of the individual volumes of this extensive composition. From the first volume, Justinus used narratives about the rulers of Assyria, from Ninos and Semiramis to Sardanapalus, the foundation of the

[23] Epit. 19–20.
[24] Epit. 2, 2.
[25] Epit. 4, 9.
[26] Epit. 6, 2.
[27] Epit. 13, 10.
[28] Epit. 14, 8
[29] Epit. 14, 9.
[30] Epit. 21, 2.
[31] Epit. 32, 1.
[32] Epit. 34, 2.
[33] Epit. 34, 3.
[34] Epit. 38, 6.
[35] Epit. 39, 6.
[36] About Justyn's method of working see: O. Seel 1972; L Ferrero 1957.
[37] Justinus, Praef. 4.
[38] Justinus, Praef. 4.
[39] Justinus, Praef. 5.

Median state and its destruction by Cyrus, as well as about the reigns of the Persian kings: Cyrus the Great, Cambyzes, and Darius.[40] In this volume, Justinus omitted a digression on the Greek cities in Asia Minor, the origins of the Lydians and Etruscans, and the cities of Egypt.[41] In volume two, the author passed over the origins of the Thessalian people,[42] while in the third one, he skipped the genesis of the Peloponnesians, the fates of Heracles' descendants, and some of the accounts of the wars fought by the Argeians.[43]

While Cassiodorus' volume on the Goths is lost, the *Getica* by Jordanes is not just an epitome of his predecessor's work[44]. Already at the beginning of his composition, Jordanes states that he did not have access to Cassiodorus' work during the writing of the *Getica*. He had read it earlier, as someone lent it to him for three days (it must have surely meant that the time of his access to this volume was very limited or this is just a rhetorical trick; in any event, this question cannot be resolved here). Likewise, it is not known how much time could have elapsed between Jordanes' reading of the tome and his writing activity.[45] As a result, he might have forgotten many words or phrases, only bearing in mind that he managed to preserve the key idea and the relevant events in conformity with the original.[46] Consequently, not only did he summarize, as he asserted, the original volume by memory, but he also made use of works by various Greek and Latin authors, adding his own conclusions.[47] For instance, his description of Britannia and her inhabitants is based on Tacitus' *Vita Agricolae*[48] and *Historiae*.[49] Jordanes does refer to Tacitus in his account, but he mentions him only as the author of the *Annales*.[50] In his narrative of the geography of Britannia, Jordanes draws on Livy as well,[51] while in his description of Scandinavia (Scandza), he refers to Ptolemy and Pomponius Mela.[52] The beginning of the *Getica* is most likely based on the work by Rufinus or Orosius.[53]

[40] Justinus, I, 1–10.

[41] Pomp. Trogus. Prol. 1.

[42] Pomp. Trogus. Prol. 2

[43] Pomp. Trogus. Prol. 3.

[44] About Jordanesie see: W.A. Goffart, 1980; J. Kolendo, 1984, p. 125–132; J. Kolendo, 1986, p. 9–16; B. Croke, 1987, p. 117–134; W.A. Goffart, 1988; M. Salamon, 1990, p. 405–415; J. Weissensteiner, 1994, p. 308–325; W.A.S. Christensen, 2002; J. Kolendo, 2009, p. 11–41; W. Liebeschuetz, 2011, p. 295–302.

[45] B. Croke, 1987, p. 121.

[46] Jord. Get. 2 „super omne autem pondus, quod nec facultas eorundem librorum nobis datur, quatenus eius sensui inserviamus, sed ut non mentiar ad triduanam lectionem, dispensatoris eius beneficio, libros ipsos antehac relegi. Quorum, quamvis verba non recolo, sensus tamen et res actas credo me integre retinere".

[47] Jord. Get. 3 „Ad quos et ex nonnullis historiis Græcis ac Latinis addidi convenientia, initium finemque et plura in medio mea dictione permiscens".

[48] Tac. Agric. 11

[49] Tac. Hist. IV 32.

[50] Jord. Get. 13.

[51] Jord. Get. 10.

[52] Jord. Get. 16.

[53] B. Croke, 1987, p. 121.

Several times, Jordanes makes references to Ablabius,[54] Joseph Flavianus,[55] Cassius Dio,[56] Orosius,[57] Pompeius Trogus,[58] Dexippus,[59] Priscus,[60] as well as Fabius[61] and Symmachus.[62] He also mentions a number of other works, occasionally referring to some enigmatic ancient authors. Certainly, we cannot reduce Jordanes to a simple copying of the predecessor's work, as he also did his own research.[63] There is evidently a different approach to the events between the extant *Chronicon* by Cassiodorus and Jordanes' *Getica*.[64] It is possible that Cassiodorus might have edited a second edition of his work, but there seems to be a different, more justified, interpretation: Jordanes was, to a great extent, independent of his predecessor.[65] Cassiodorus described the history of the Amal dynasty[66]. Meanwhile, Jordanes described many rulers of the Goths in the third century, which did not belong to this family: Cniwa, Respa, Veduco, Tharuaro, Ariaric, Aoric, and Geberic[67]. Perhaps the information about these non-Amals rulers took Jordanes not from Kasjodor, but from Dexippos[68]. This impression is even made stronger by the *Scythica Vindobonensia*, published several years ago[69], where the account of the campaign against the Goths in Decius' reign is in correspondence with Jordanes' narrative and contrary to the Latin sources. It is difficult to say, nonetheless, in this particular case if Jordanes had drawn from the Greek tradition on that war or if it was Cassiodorus who did so.

The situation is even better in the case of Xiphilinus' epitome of the Historia Romana by Cassius Dio. Fortunately, we have both Dio's text and Xiphilinus' epitome for the late period of the Roman Republic and the Julio-Claudian dynasty.[70] As Xiphilinus declared, his work aimed to present the past in order to gain an advantage in the then current political situation, arising from an analysis of history.[71] Thanks to the partial preservation of Cassius Dio's work, it is possible to make a rough estimation to see how much of the predecessor's account was abridged by Xiphilinus. It is estimated that the epitomator left

[54] Jord. Get. 28.
[55] Jord. Get. 29.
[56] Jord. Get. 40, 58, 65, 150.
[57] Jord. Get. 44, 58.
[58] Jord. Get. 48, 61.
[59] Jord. Get. 113.
[60] Jord. Get. 123, 178, 183, 222, 254, 255.
[61] Jord. Get. 150.
[62] Jord. Get. 83, 88.
[63] W. Liebeschuetz, 2011, p. 296.
[64] B. Croke, 1987, p. 130–131.
[65] B. Croke, 1987, p. 131.
[66] R. Kasperski, 2013, p. 54.
[67] R. Kasperski, 2013, p. 67–69.
[68] M. Kulikowski, 2007, p. 55.
[69] See: C. Davenport, Ch. Mallan 2013, p. 57–73; C. Davenport, Ch. Mallan 2014, p. 203–226; G. Martin, J. Grusková 2014a, p. 101–120; G. Martin, J. Grusková 2014b, p. 29–43; G. Martin, J. Grusková 2014c, p. 728–754; G. Martin, J. Grusková 2015, p. 35–54.
[70] K. Biały, 2015, p. 391.
[71] Ch. Mallan, 2013, p. 611.

out as much as 3/4 of Cassius Dio's narrative for the period of the Empire.[72] In an extreme case of the account on Pompey, Cassius Dio's 69,300 words are reduced to 5.050 in Xiphilinus' epitome.[73] The omitted material includes many speeches, which are either left out or only recapitulated. These are long orations from the late period of the Roman Republic (e.g., a speech during the debate on granting the leadership in the anti-pirate campaign to Pompey, Caesar's speech to the rebel troops at Placentia, Cicero's speech against Mark Antony, and Calenus' against Cicero)[74] and the period of the Empire. It is notable that the dispute between Agrippa and Maecenas, essential to Cassius Dio's discourse, is reduced to Xiphilinus' brief commentary in no more than five lines.[75] The Byzantine author keeps some of the longer orations intact (Marcus Aurelius' speech before his armed confrontation with Avidius Cassius; orations of Boudicca and Suetonius Paulinus; Hadrian's speech on the imperial succession; Vindex and Otho addressing their forces before the battle of Cremona; exchange between Augustus and Cleopatra, and between Augustus and Livia).[76] Of course, Xiphilinus omits Dio's material other than orations. For instance, the reader is not informed of the Catiline Conspiracy[77] and Caesar's conquest of Gaul is left out as well.[78] Likewise, he ignores the narrative of the conspiracy of Varro Murena, referring only to his execution in the year 18 BC[79] and omits almost everything from Cassius Dio's account of the fall of Seianus.[80] Xiphilinus does not show much interest in Augustus' eastern policy, providing just a few lines mostly dealing with curiosities such as the Hindu bringing some tigers into Rome for the first time or a conflict with the Nubian queen Amanirenas, most likely because of the fact that a woman was in command of the Nubian troops.[81] Furthermore, the author shows no concern for administrative issues and ignores this subject matter altogether.[82] Some simple errors can be found as well, e.g., Julia is mentioned as the sister, not daughter, of Augustus.[83] As can be seen, Xiphilinus treated Cassius Dio's Historia Romana mostly as an ample source of anecdotes and bon mots.[84]

The transmissions of Cassius Dio and Xiphilinus concerning the Lex Gabinia have been compared recently. At this point, let us only recapitulate the key conclusions of this analysis. First of all, Xiphilinus offers no information on Au. Gabinius, who put forward his proposal to grant the authority in the state for three years to the ex-consul in order to enable a more effective anti-pirate

[72] P.A. Brunt, 1980, p. 489.
[73] Ch. Mallan, 2013, p. 618.
[74] P.A. Brunt, 1980, p. 489–490; Ch. Mallan, 2013, p. 618.
[75] Ch. Mallan, 1980, p. 619.
[76] P.A. Brunt, 1980, p. 489; Ch. Mallan, 2013, p. 619.
[77] P.A. Brunt, 1980 p. 489.
[78] P.A. Brunt, 1980, p. 490.
[79] P.A. Brunt, 1980, p. 490.
[80] P.A. Brunt, 1980, p. 490–491.
[81] P.A. Brunt, 1980, p. 490.
[82] P.A. Brunt, 1980, p. 490.
[83] P.A. Brunt, 1980, p. 490.
[84] P.A. Brunt, 1980, p. 491.

campaign.[85] Xiphilinus, on the other hand, only makes a mention of the Senate conferring the functions of fleet commander and dictator on Pompey, while completely ignoring the fact that the Senate was against his appointment. Following an assassination attempt on the popular tribune's life, a wave of violent rioting directed against the Senate took place and the senators were forced to take flight.[86] Roscius and Lutatius Catullus made an effort to curtail Pompey's influence by attempting to carry through the appointment of two commanders or the elimination of Pompey's candidacy.[87] In Xiphilinus' work, the Senate is given the term normally used to refer to the Senate of Constantinople in the 11th century.[88] The epitomator also passes over the orations present in Cassius Dio's work.[89] Although Xiphilinus' epitome preserves a passage reflecting the people's hostile attitude to the Senate's course of action, but the general impression is that the senators supported Pompey as a candidate and the people were against his appointment.[90] Distortions in Xiphilinus' account may have arisen, at least in part, from his ignorance of the formal proceedings in the Roman Republic, which may have seemed somewhat odd to the Byzantine author[91] or, possibly, would have been his intentional manoeuvre meant to serve the educational character of this composition.[92] The latter proposition may be more likely due to the fact that the Byzantines were more concerned with their domestic conflicts than foreign wars, which may also account for selective preservation of the works by Appianus and Cassius Dio.[93] In any event, his epitome is not only an abridgement, but it also distorts the sense of the original work.

Sometimes, Xiphilinus adds his own information. In his epitome, the view of Brutus and Cassius is closer to Plutarch than to Cassius Dio's narrative.[94] He also draws on Plutarch in providing the information about the descent of Marcellus, Augustus' nephew, from Marcellus, the hero of the war with Hannibal.[95] Moreover, Xiphilinus' account of the miraculous rain during the Marcomannic wars resembles Eusebius, not the pagan authors. It is possible that some Christian writer was Xiphilinus' source for this event.[96] Obviously, in cases like this, an epitome tends to distort the actual meaning of the source work to a considerable extent. It makes the contents more trite, selecting those items of information that would be of more interest, in the epitomator's view, to the reader. Not only is the sense of the epitomized narrative always well understood, but also some extra information is sometimes added.

[85] K. Biały, 2015, p. 393.
[86] Cas. Dio XXXVI 24, 1–2.
[87] Cas. Dio XXXVI 31–36.
[88] K. Biały, 2015, p. 393.
[89] K. Biały, 2015, p. 393.
[90] K. Biały, 2015, p. 394.
[91] K. Biały, 2015, p. 394.
[92] K. Biały, 2015, p. 394–397.
[93] A. Kaldellis, 2012, p. 75.
[94] P.A. Brunt, 1980, p. 489.
[95] P.A. Brunt, 1980, p. 489.
[96] P.A. Brunt, 1980, p. 489.

In consequence, an epitome cannot be treated as a reflection of the views of the author of the original work. Also, the selection of the information by the epitomator did not have to concern the most important facts featured in the main source. First of all, his choice is the effect of the epitomator's interests. More or less intentionally, he would select the details to be copied into his work, while those considered as less significant would be omitted. In most cases, the criteria followed by epitomators remain unknown. For this reason, drawing conclusions on the source as based on its epitome is very illusory. In those few cases where we can make a comparison between the main work and its epitome, major differences can be noticed between the narratives of the two compositions. In fact, the epitomator may not have understood the realities depicted in the base source. This would lead to many essential elements of the original author's narrative being omitted as well as to distortions in the sense of the main source. At times, the author writing an epitome would not only summarize the sense of the work incorrectly, but he would also add some material drawn from other sources as their message suited him better. In consequence, epitomators were often much more independent than it would follow from the nature of the epitomizing practice. They were not merely passive mediators between the lost source and us, but approached the task set out for them creatively.

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