CHAPTER TWO

ROYAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE HELLENISTIC AGE

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Despite both the recent claim that the absence of an individual dimension of existence in the classical age hindered the development of “autobiography” in the Greek world, shaping, at best, an autobiographical dimension rather than an autobiographical genre,¹ and the daring conclusion that “the Greeks did not write autobiographies,”² autobiography has in fact a long history in Greek historiography, as Vivienne Gray has highlighted in the previous chapter.

As observed by G. Misch,³ this literary genre lacks a specific form, and can present itself under the guise of letters, speeches, travel diaries, and memoirs, among others; thus, autobiographical traces must not be overlooked as has sometimes happened.⁴ In effect, autobiographical stances have been recorded ever since Homer;⁵ despite the fact that the Greek cultural milieu (and the Athenian in particular) does not itself seem to favor the emergence of a strongly autobiographical focus due to the prevalence of the public over the individual dimension, in Greek

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fifth-century literary history autobiography is already significantly present, although not yet a precisely defined and well-established literary genre.\(^6\)

In effect, rarity of autobiographical writing in Greece\(^7\) undoubtedly derives from the “public” nature of the classical way of life, which does not foster the development of individual-centered literature.\(^8\) Greater interest in the contribution of the individual (with his/her cultural background and approach) to political, social, and cultural life and to historical events arises instead, and not by chance, in the fourth century, as the individual dimension gradually imposes itself to the detriment of the collective. To be precise, however, this is still an age of transition in which individual historical figures do progressively emerge, albeit with their merely public image (profession, political community, and school of thought).\(^9\)

In the Hellenistic age, the decline of the polis is accompanied by increasing interest in the individual dimension of life, a new milieu in which the autobiographical genre thrives; yet, despite the spreading of subjectivity and the increasing importance attributed to the private sphere of the individual, it must be remembered that autobiography is still a genre reserved for exceptional persons who play an active role in politics and literature and occupy key positions in society. In effect, extant material testifies to the shift of literary autobiographical perspectives from adherence to well-acknowledged models (the “good citizen” arising from Isocrates’ *Antidosis* and in Lycurgus) to claims of “extraordinariness” on the part of some key historical figures.\(^10\) Thus, in other words, the link between the emergence of “autobiography” and a newly established focus on daily individual life, which is indeed reflected in Hellenistic literature and the arts, does not prove as amply representative as it might appear.\(^11\)


