

BOOK REVIEW

The Library of Alexandria: A Cultural Crossroads of the Ancient World. By DAN, ANCA and CHRISTOPHE RICO, eds. Jerusalem, IL: Polis Institute Press, 2017. Pp. xxix + 409. Hardcover, \$69.00. ISBN 978-965-7698-10-5.

Anca Dan and Christophe Rico present eleven papers addressing issues surrounding the Royal Library of Alexandria (hereafter “Library”). The papers originated in the 2015 conference *The Second Polis Institute Interdisciplinary Conference*, which was intended to foster interdisciplinary sharing of expertise and perspectives on the Library among scholars of religion, Classical history, archaeology, philology and literature. The papers are presented in substantially their original form, though with notes and bibliographies, and with cross-references added to other papers in the collection that touch on similar points. Appropriately for the interdisciplinary focus of the collection, individual chapters provide sufficient background to the problems they address to be accessible to a scholarly audience without specialized knowledge of their particular focus. Thus, the volume as a whole provides an accessible introduction to the current state of scholarship on the Library, the main lines of argumentation and the relevant primary sources. In turn, the approaches tend to be less novel and more refinements of established approaches or additions of wider perspectives.

The volume comprises three sections: Sources and Contacts, From Words to Space, and Fire and Mysteries. The first section includes a survey of the archaeology of the Library and three chapters approaching the relationship of the Library and the formation of the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. The second section looks at the scholarly activities of the Alexandrians that were enabled by the Library: creation of glossaries or *onomastika*, Apollonius of Rhodes’ and Eratosthenes’ engagement of scholarship in their poetry and Eratosthenes’ geographical research. The final section reviews perspectives on the Library’s destruction: two chapters examine authors’ uses of or references to the Library for clues to its status, and two chapters explore the writers’ literary or polemic purposes in referencing the Library. The volume concludes with summaries of the

discussions at the conference, an index of ancient authors, and a cumulative bibliography.

Consideration of space prevents discussion of each chapter; I discuss two representative chapters: Sylvie Honigman's chapter "The library and the Septuagint," and Christophe Cusset's chapter "Apollonios de Rhodes et Ératosthène de Cyrène."

In "The library and the Septuagint: between representation and reality," Sylvie Honigman revisits the *Letter of Aristeas* as a source for the relationship between the Library and the Septuagint. Starting from Wright's broadly accepted reading of the *Letter*, which is that it does make or support a claim that the Septuagint was included in the Library,¹ and the general trend in the literature to discount the *Letter's* explanatory value for either the Library or the origins of the Septuagint, Honigman reframes the question, asking how the *Letter's* depiction of the Library and the Septuagint differ from their representation in other sources, and probing the significance of that difference. She summarizes recent research supporting the conclusion that the Septuagint was originally a translation of the Pentateuch as a legal document within the Ptolemaic administration. Next, Honigman shows that the sources over-emphasize the Peripatetic influence on the Library and offers Egyptian temple libraries that included both literary and administrative documents as an alternative model. In the sense of Stephens' "co-presences"² the Library would communicate the Ptolemies' commitment to Greek scholarship and Egyptian Maat; therefore, representative administrative documents, such as the Septuagint, may have been included. This line of argument is attractive in that it seriously considers Alexandria's multi-cultural context, but may not convince everyone: if we knew the Library collected administrative documents, this model would be explanatory, but its role as microcosm could have been instantiated already by its collection's breadth.

Christophe Cusset in the chapter "Apollonios de Rhodes et Ératosthène de Cyrène: bibliothécaires et poètes à Alexandrie" compares the librarian-poets along several axes: chronology, Homeric criticism, philology in poetry and polymathy. Cusset exploits the sources' ambiguity as to the priority of Apollonios as head of the Library and identification of both as Callimachus' students: the authority of the "heads of the library" papyrus and the Suda biographies is limited,

¹ Wright, B. G. III, 2015. *The Letter of Aristeas. "Aristeas to Philocrates" or "On the Translation of the Law of the Jews."* Berlin, 455.

² Stephens, S. S. 2003. *Seeing Double: Intercultural Politics in Ptolemaic Alexandria.* Berkeley, 196-208.

but suggests that the comparison may be instructive. Next, Cusset reviews the passages of Apollonius' *Argonautica* identified as responding to Zenodotus' Homeric textual criticism, noting that they prompt the conclusion that Apollonius' work *Contra Zenodotum* focused on the *Iliad* alone, that variant texts of Homer were available, not only Zenodotus' version, and that Apollonius relied on his own examination of the texts; the even more exiguous traces of Eratosthenes' Homeric scholarship similarly point to a focus on the *Iliad*. Broader philological interests, especially on usage of archaic words or word-forms, again converge: both writers use their poetry to demonstrate their position in the debate on usage of the Homeric terms *phōriamos* and *chernētis*. Finally, Cusset compares Eratosthenes' better-known scientific studies with Apollonius' incorporation of advances in astronomy and geography in the *Argonautica*. Each of the comparisons is carefully documented and judiciously framed: Apollonius and Eratosthenes do not repeat the same tropes, but engage central Alexandrian concerns each with his own approach; the comparisons produce evidence for the sorts of scholarship the Library enabled and how it redounded to the praise of its Ptolemaic patrons.

The collection's strength is its demonstration of the challenges and opportunities of the multi-disciplinary work being done around the topic of the Library; coming from a variety of disciplinary settings, individual chapters do not share assumptions about methodologies or what qualifies as an interesting or informative problem, much less about definitive answers. Four of the essays at least touch on the topic of the Septuagint, and a similar number on the ultimate fate of the Library, with the result that the reader comes away less with dogmatic conclusions and more with an appreciation for the issues' complexities. With that caveat, the essays are collectively well-grounded in the scholarship and primary evidence; those coming to the debates for the first time as well as those familiar with them will both have their assumptions challenged and be provided with the material they need to evaluate the competing claims.

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