

BOOK REVIEW

Inside Roman Libraries: Book Collections and Their Management in Antiquity. By GEORGE W. HOUSTON. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. Pp. xvi + 327. Hardcover, \$59.95. ISBN 978-1-4696-1780-0.

As the subtitle and the Preface explain, this is a book about book collections, not (primarily) about libraries as buildings or as institutions. Houston's stated boundaries are "the geographical area of the Roman Empire and the four centuries from Cicero to Constantine" (2).

After a concise "introduction to the Roman book roll" and to its physical characteristics, Houston goes on to offer a veritable biography of book collections, from their formation to the perils that may bring about their demise. Chapter 1 presents the evidence for the ways in which books were made or acquired and whole collections could exchange hands, with or without the previous owners' consent. Chapter 2 examines several book lists that survive on papyrus. A list of books is not necessarily the catalogue of an actual collection of books, but Houston lays out six criteria (or rather, five and a miscellaneous sixth) whereby to recognize a book list as such a catalogue. He thus narrows down the list (pun not intended) to eight papyri, five of which he examines in detail, emphasizing the different character of each and offering informed speculation on the respective libraries.

The next two chapters turn to actual book collections whose remains survive to our day. Chapter 3 examines the library of the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum and its contents; Chapter 4 treats five collections that can be identified among the papyri excavated in Oxyrhynchus. Houston makes extensive use of paratextual materials such as subscriptions and investigates the significance of identifying scribal hands and the presence of annotations. Chapter 5 deals with "nonbook materials": the objects associated with book collections, from shelving and book-boxes to the interior design of libraries and the artwork that frequently embellished them. Mostly focusing on evidence from Rome, Chapter 6 looks at the personnel that libraries employed – from the lowest-level staff up to the Commissioner of the Imperial Libraries – and the responsibilities of each.

The Conclusion consists of a series of short paragraphs summarizing the key points of the argument. In a ring composition of sorts with Chapter 1, the last paragraph outlines the diverse dangers that threatened books and book collections, from volcanoes to the advent of the codex. (From the very start Houston is quite explicit that “This is a book about book-rolls” (xiii).) The three appendices provide, respectively, a text, translation, and notes to the book lists examined in Chapter 2; a checklist of the volumes identified to date from the Villa of the Papyri; and a more detailed description of the “Breccia + GH3” collection than had been given at 146-8. A twenty-page bibliography and two helpful indices conclude the volume.

Building a coherent narrative out of this patchy and scattered material—papyrological evidence from Herculaneum and Egypt (with little temporal overlap between the two), library buildings from Asia Minor and North Africa, literary evidence largely from Rome, all fragmentary in one way or the other—is a mighty task, but one at which Houston succeeds. Inevitably, a large amount of speculation and generalization is often involved, but he is generally upfront about the gaps in the evidence and does not shirk from presenting conjecture as such.

A particular interest of Houston’s is the lifetime of books. The Villa of the Papyri provides hard data, in that the date of its destruction is known and the collection was not subsequently altered. Oxyrhynchus is more complicated: excavation records are very patchy for twenty-first century standards, and thus dating the demise of a collection on stratigraphical grounds is a tricky enterprise, although attempts can be made which lead to interesting results, as Houston had already shown in *GRBS* 47 (2007). The boundaries of individual “concentrations” treated in Chapter 4 are also sometimes open to disagreement. For instance, “Breccia + GH3” only includes four of the ten or more papyri of Aeschylus, written by the same hand in the same format and therefore probably meant as a set, that are now split between Oxford and Florence (MP³ 20–1, 24-8, 30, 33, 36–8, 40–2, 43–5, 49).

Given the attention Houston devotes to identifying scribes’ hands and noting the presence of marginalia, it is surprising that no attempt is made to identify annotators’ hands across different manuscripts (see e.g. W. A. Johnson, *Bookrolls and Scribes in Oxyrhynchus*, Toronto 2004, 24). Such an identification considerably strengthens the argument for regarding the relevant papyri as parts of one

collection. Likewise, what does it mean for a collection when no hand can be traced across two or more of its annotated papyri?

The bibliography is plentiful and up to date; two further relevant monographs presumably appeared too late for Houston to use (E. Puglia, *Il libro e lo scaffale. Opere bibliografiche e inventari di libri su papiro*, Naples 2013; G. Del Mastro, *Titoli e annotazioni bibliologiche nei papiri greci di Ercolano*, Naples 2014). All Greek and Latin is translated and the discussion is always very clearly presented, making the volume accessible to a non-Classically trained readership despite its often highly technical content. Houston has produced a learned, wide-ranging, and very informative account of Roman book collections and of the people involved with them. It is certainly recommended reading for anyone interested in the practicalities of book culture in Roman times.

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