

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Oxford Handbook of Science and Medicine in the Classical World*. Edited by PAUL T. KEYSER and JOHN SCARBOROUGH. New York, NY and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xv +1045. Hardback, \$175.00. ISBN: 978-0-199-73414-6.

Handbooks on classical subjects are now a fixture in our field and several recent ones have highlighted, and thus promoted, marginalized areas of study. The current volume aims at the same goal, offering a “synoptic synthesis of how scholars currently understand [ancient] sciences” (1) and it expands its scope to include ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China. The essays are divided into five sections as follows: A, ten essays, covers the ancient scientific traditions beyond Greece and Rome; B, Greek science, four essays; C, Hellenistic Science, sixteen essays; D, Greco-Roman Science, eleven essays; E, late antique and early Byzantine science. The individual essays cover such disciplines as mathematics, astronomy, medicine, geography, natural science, mechanics and pneumatics, astrology, alchemy, music and harmonic theory, pharmacology, dietetics, physiognomy and more. Thus, the scope of the book is vast, as to both subject matter and the thirteen centuries it covers.

A collection such as this raises some important questions about the recent trend to produce very expensive handbooks. The first is their goal. Are they written for those already expert in a given area or for those who wish to learn more about an area of study and its current scholarship in a limited number of pages? In this reviewer’s opinion, the work under review has a bit of both. Before going further, let me state that no one of whom I am aware is sufficiently competent in all these scientific and mathematical areas to pass judgement on the technical content of each essay. Rather, I approached this review by looking at essays on areas of which I know little and also at some about which I know more. In so doing I hoped to be able to determine how useful the book would be for non-experts and experts alike.

Section A is especially challenging as it deals with technical topics from cultures with which the average classicist may not be familiar. Some chapters seem

very aware that they are writing for non-specialists, but others employ technical terms and mathematical formulas that will baffle many.

In the Greco-Roman chapters we are on more familiar ground. Nonetheless, technical terms abound for some fields (mathematics and astronomy, for example) and without foreknowledge the average reader may, as did I, occasionally lose the thread.

Such examples do not taint the entire work. Many essays are clear to a non-specialist. In others, if one cannot follow the actual mathematics, at least one can understand the scope of, say, the uses of mathematics in ancient Egypt. If we do not really understand “concentric-deferent-with epicycle” (793-94) we can still marvel at Ptolemy’s astronomical instruments. We meet fascinating people like Scribonius Largus and Celsus, with whom we may not have been familiar.

Perhaps the issues I have raised are inherent to a core question surrounding handbooks. Should they contain entry level essays that are readily intelligible by any reasonably educated reader, or are they essays for people already working in that field? My own preference is for the former, but I fully understand that the limits of space for each chapter and the vast expanse of centuries, cultures and disciplines this handbook attempts to cover may combine to leave little space for introductory material.

There is much to be learned from this particular handbook. It is easier to learn it in some essays than in others, and all essays contain bibliographies for further reading. Line drawings and photographs are helpful. For some chapters, many readers will need frequent recourse to dictionaries and patient friends from other disciplines. Perhaps this book, especially given its cost, will be most useful for an institutional library, allowing readers to pick and choose which chapters appeal to them.

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