

BOOK REVIEW

Letters and Communities: Studies in the Socio-Political Dimensions of Ancient Epistolography. Edited by PAOLA CECCARELLI, LUTZ DOERING AND THORSTEN FÖGEN. Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. viii + 373. Hardback, \$105.00. ISBN 978-0-19-880420-8.

The interesting volume edited by Ceccarelli, Doering and Fögen originates from a conference held in 2011. It presents 13 chapters organized into 4 thematic parts and preceded by a learned introduction. Each chapter is followed by its own bibliography. The table of contents is placed at the beginning of the book, while the indexes (*Index Rerum, Nominum, Auctorum, Locorum*) are at the end. The Introduction is divided into two parts. The first part gives a very useful overview on letter-writing and communities, which might be especially valuable to those who are new to the topic: the authors underline the key-role of letters in terms of permanence as opposed to “ephemeral” (6) face-to-face interactions, of being the hub of the communications between centre and periphery, thus of carrying a “communal dimension” (17). The second part of the introduction explains the rationale of the order and organization of the chapters.

Part A (*Theory and Practice of Epistolary Communication*) contains two chapters by Fögen and Schröder respectively. The former examines ancient ideas on the letters as well as their social value through some case studies: Demetrius’ *Περὶ ἐρμηνείας*, Pseudo-Demetrius’ *Τύποι ἐπιστολικοί*, Iulius Victor’s *Ars rhetorica*, Pseudo-Libanius’ *Ἐπιστολιμαῖοι χαρακτήρες* but also Cicero, Seneca, Pliny the Younger and Erasmus of Rotterdam (Chapter 1). The latter, by utilizing Cicero’s letters as a case study, highlights the importance of couriers, who can influence the letter’s tone and content based on whether the sender trusts the courier or not (Chapter 2). This is an interesting way of discussing the “social function of letter-writing” (90) through the analysis of the role of couriers as an integral part of the framework of letter-writing.

Part B (*Configurations of Power and Epistolary Communication. From Greece to Rome*) contains five chapters. Lewis (Chapter 3) reflects on the role letters play in recognizing and legitimizing the tyrants’ power – which was “difficult to define” (113) – by discussing some letters written in a Syracusan context (Dionysius I,

Dionysius II, Dion, Timoleon and Agathocles). The chapter also highlights the necessity of distinguishing between “letters from a ruler to an outside power, and those internal to the state” (111). On the contrary, Mari (Chapter 4) analyses letters written by rulers who had a title which was definitely recognized, namely the Macedonian Kings. She focuses on the differences between *epistolai* and *diagrammata*, which she respectively translates as “letters” and “circular letters” (121), and she puts sources, chronology, style and addressees under close scrutiny by underlining the “different degrees of interference” (135). Ceccarelli is also preoccupied with letters in the Hellenistic period, but with a different scope and from a different standpoint (Chapter 5). Indeed, she focuses on the construction of authority from a Seleukid perspective by looking at the dossier of Magnesia on the Maeander regarding the request to have the festival for Artemis Leukophryene (Artemis “of the white brows”) and the city recognized respectively as a festival with the same status as the Pythian games and as a sacred and inviolable city. The dossier features both the request of the Magnesians and some of the answers from kings, leagues and cities (149), which enables Ceccarelli to analyse the language and the different reactions of the communities. Osborne (Chapter 6) also deals with the Hellenistic period, but from yet another perspective: the Roman conquest of Greece. By examining some letters written by Roman magistrates, Osborne reflects on the fact that Roman magistrates were obliged “not merely to report their actions, but to explain them” (201). With Gildenhard (Chapter 7), the transition to the Roman times is smooth. The chapter highlights the role of Cicero’s letters written between 49 and 44 BC as promoters of civic community: letter-writing is useful to Cicero because it allows him to retain “a voice in trying political conditions” (223), it contributes “to a networking effort designed to re-energize a Republican commonwealth” (226) and constructs “a triangular relationship between Caesar, Cicero, and the exiled Republicans” (228).

Part C (*Letters and Communities in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*) is constituted by 5 chapters. Grätz (Chapter 8) examines the Letters in Ezra 4-7, especially the form of their prescripts and the content of the letters, to show that they are probably fictitious and were forged in the Hellenistic period. Alexander (Chapter 9) analyzes the social function of the letters in Judaism “at the level of ethnic cohesion” (253) by looking at the festal letters at the beginning of 2 Maccabees, the letters in the Book of the Acts, in Rabbinic literature and in the early Islamic period. Doering (Chapter 10) is concerned with the Epistle of Baruch at the end of the *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch*, which is a case study to underline that the letter has different addressees which help to shape its readers and their

knowledge. With Barclay (Chapter 11) the focus is shifted to Christianity, in particular to the role of the letters of Paul in creating and shaping the Christian community: the letters are “a powerful medium” (299), but, since reading letters does not exist without physical presence, they are also part of a bigger network formed by local communities, oral communications and gossiping, envoys, delegates and churches’ personnel. Niebuhr (Chapter 12) analyzes how communities are described in the Epistle of James and how the letter strengthens *the community-ethos* (317).

Part D (*Envoi*) consists of only one chapter. Edwards (Chapter 13) examines Seneca’s letters to Lucilius and shows the key role such letters had in creating a community of friends and philosophers: the former relates to the present, the latter to the past and the future. Indeed, letters connect friends who are absent, “the would-be philosopher to earlier thinkers” (339) and Seneca to future readers (345).

To conclude, this volume is a valuable resource to both scholars who are not well acquainted with epistolography and to experts in the topic. All chapters are enjoyable and they have been arranged very neatly to form a cohesive volume.

GIUSTINA MONTI

University of Lincoln, gmonti@lincoln.ac.uk