

Private Epistolography of the Imperial Period: From Bibliophily to Textual Criticism

The private epistolography of the Imperial Period reveals a shift in the role of the scribe from mere copyist to a new kind of bibliophile/philologist who is more actively engaged with the text and whose more markedly erudite writing style, as attested in private correspondence, is sometimes natural and sometimes contrived. This transition was the result of a growing trend towards bibliophily during Imperial Times (Reynolds & Wilson 1991, 19). The experienced scribes of the period were no longer content with simply reproducing books: in contrast with the largely mechanical copying of earlier times (Koroli 2019, 138), Imperial scribes also took a more active role as “book-hunters”, seeking reliable book copies to collate, from which they can produce an accurate text. (Caroli 2012, 57).

But why did this phenomenon develop around 27 BC, and what characteristics of it can we trace in the private letters preserved in papyri? There are three ways of approaching the topic of bibliophily in any given historical period: (1) the analysis of literary texts, in order to investigate what was popular among the readers of the time; (2) the analysis of intertextual references found in documents and letters; (3) the analysis of any direct references to books of famous authors. In this study the third method will be used, mainly through the examination of two manuscript sources: P. Petaus 30 and P. Oxy XVIII 2192; a third source, P. Oxy.LXIII 4365, will also be used to supplement the discussion. The first two papyri have been chosen because of their direct and explicit references to the exchange and/or sale of books, while the last one was selected as a closely relevant Christian example. My presentation will especially focus on the following topics: the profile of the readers and the bibliophiles of the period; how they procured and used the books that were available at the time; what kind of changes they were likely to make to the literary text; and whether and to what extent the phenomenon continued to flourish in the following years.

References

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