

## Books as Plunder? A Reconsideration of Plutarch *Lucullus* 42

The traditional interpretation of Plutarch *Lucullus* 42, in which Plutarch describes the library of Lucullus, is that Lucullus acquired the books for his famous library from the spoils of his military campaigns. This interpretation is significant because it has been central to arguments about “books as plunder” as a sign of the cultural prestige of the book. I argue that Plutarch has been misread: he never suggests Lucullus took books as plunder. Instead, the passage sheds light on anxieties about wealth and literary culture. Granted that books were associated with prestige and elite culture in the High Empire, this new interpretation suggests that they were also associated with vulgar spending and violations of social order.

Scholars have seen “books as plunder” as a metaphor for cultural appropriation (Too 2010: 40-44), as an index of the prestige of books (Johnstone 2014: 375), and as a concrete way for Romans to use the cultural authority of books to buttress their political and military authority (Neudecker 2004). However, actual examples of generals taking books as plunder are rare. One has even been shown to be a complete invention of Plutarch: the case of Aemilius Paullus taking the books of King Perseus (Johnstone 2014: 381-82).

The idea of books as plunder relies heavily on Lucullus. Without the case of Aemilius Paullus, the only other real example is Sulla’s seizure of the library of Apellicon, and one instance is hardly a trend. I first argue that the supposition that Lucullus took books as plunder is largely the result of reading Isidore of Seville into Plutarch, and of misunderstanding what Plutarch meant by *philotimia*. The context of the passage makes it clear that Lucullus actually purchased his books, at no small expense.

Yet the fact of purchase rather than plunder opens up a new line of inquiry: a focus not on books as a sign of prestige and cultural authority, but as a sign of vulgar spending.

I argue, in short, that Lucullus acquired his books by spending, not sacking. There is no ancient evidence that he took the books as spoils of war. It is only through the retrospect of Isidore, writing in the seventh century, that the books appear to be plunder. Isidore records that Lucullus gained his library *e pontica praeda* (*Etym.* 6.5.1). Plutarch, who gave a description of Lucullus's library, wrote that "its use was more honorable (φιλοτιμότερα) than its acquisition" (*Luc.* 42.1)—to give a translation characteristic of the traditional interpretation. The implication of such a reading would be that Lucullus acquired the books in some dishonorable fashion during his campaigns in the East. However, *philotimia* does not mean "loving honor" so much as "loving to receive honors," that is, "ambitious." Plutarch is saying that Lucullus's spending on the library was ambitious, and that his use of the library (to entertain guests) was even more ambitious and extravagant. In support of my interpretation that the books were not taken as plunder, Plutarch himself suggests that the books (and other luxury items) of Lucullus were bought with the wealth he acquired as booty (*Luc.* 39.2): "It was on these (the expenditures on his villas) that he lavishly used up the wealth (τῷ πλούτῳ ῥύδην καταχρώμενος), of which he had acquired a magnificent abundance from his military campaigns." Later, Lucullus's spending on books is explicitly compared to how he spent his wealth (ἐχρήτητο τῷ πλούτῳ, 41.7) on dining.

The notion of books as plunder typically supports arguments about books as a sign of nobility and culture. Yet this passage of Plutarch suggests another connection: books

as a sign of violations of social order. Lucullus's extravagance was famous. Consider too Petronius's Trimalchio, who had "three libraries" (*Sat.* 48.4), Seneca's worry about the low born using books for display (*Tranq.* 9.4-7), and Lucian's *Ignorant Book Collector*. We should consider that the (undeniable) connection of books with prestige might have blinded us to another dimension of them, their association with vulgarity and violations of social order.

### Bibliography

- Johnstone, Steven. 2014. "A New History of Libraries and Books in the Hellenistic Period," *ClAnt* 33: 347-93.
- Neudecker, Richard. 2004 "Aspekte öffentlicher Bibliotheken in der Kaiserzeit." In Barbara E. Borg, ed., *Paideia: The World of the Second Sophistic*, 293-313. Berlin.
- Too, Yun Lee. 2010. *The Idea of the Library in the Ancient World*. Oxford.