

## Reviews

*Presses are encouraged to submit books dealing with Late Antiquity for consideration for review to any of JLA's three Book Review Editors: Sabine Huebner (sabine.huebner@unibas.ch); Jason Moralee (moralee.jason@gmail.com); and Kristina Sessa (sessa.3@osu.edu).*

### ***God's Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts***

BRENT NONGBRI

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.  
Pp. 416. ISBN 978-0-300-21541-0

Reviewed by Mark Letteney  
Princeton/Sapienza Università di Roma)

Two problems, and one might even say annoyances, motivate Brent Nongbri's peerless *God's Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts*: paleography is preponderantly unreliable and the antiquities market is a black-box. Nongbri brings meticulous archival research coupled with a keen critical eye and an encyclopedic knowledge of Egyptian papyri to plead for transparency above all. We scholars must be clear with one another about the limits of our knowledge of the past and about the extent to which the indeterminacy of paleographic dating and the shadow of the antiquities market obscure our ability to know many of the things that we would rather be able to say. The strength of Nongbri's research is in his acute ability to find striking new data in ancient and well-worked evidence, and to point out deceptions in the scholarly discussion: first and foremost scholarly self-deception, and only

subsequently, and occasionally, more insidious intrigues.

The first chapter provides an overview of the field of papyrology and codicology. This discussion will be beside the point for a number of readers who come to the book with significant papyrological experience, but it serves as a useful baseline for the book's intended audience: scholars who have perhaps glanced through Metzger's cursory *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible*, but who have not spent any time with standard introductory reading on papyrology beyond the insular discipline of New Testament studies. Nongbri's critical intervention begins in Chapter 2, "The Dating Game," where he systematically undermines common presumptions about the reliability of paleographic dating for literary manuscripts, exposing the field as a house of cards vulnerable to collapse at an even slightly shifting foundation. This *tour de force* demonstrates, in no uncertain terms, the motivating insight for the rest of Nongbri's analysis: "Paleographic comparison is by its very nature a subjective undertaking, and oftentimes, especially when early Christian manuscripts are concerned, paleographic dating can devolve into little more than an exercise in wishful thinking" (72).

The rest of Nongbri's book glides on the flight-path set by this opening act of scholarly deconstruction. But, all is not lost. The next four chapters, where Nongbri finally arrives at the "archaeology" promised in his title, weave intensive research on the acquisition history of the

most important papyrological collections with indefatigable attention to manuscripts as artifacts in and of themselves. These chapters are beautifully and compellingly written, and they demonstrate both the breadth of Nongbri's archival research and his particular penchant for telling a well-placed story: tales that are illustrative rather than aberrational. Tantalizing details throughout show that the book was written with persuasion in mind, and not to exhaust the store of information drudged up during Nongbri's investigations. Even seemingly trivial (if entertaining) details, such as the one about Rudolph Ibscher's ill-timed sneeze (310, note 67), offer readers insight into the very human networks of relation, commerce, and patronage that stand between discoveries and their scientific examiners, as well as the humanity of those examiners themselves whose noble intentions are often undermined by incomplete information and dubious methods.

Chapter 7 witnesses Nongbri at his best: re-narrating the reticulated stories woven around a codex of Philo's writings with an apparent archaeological provenance. According to the standard account, this third-century codex found in a Koptos home (modern Qift) included in its binding scraps of two Gospels that were copied in the second. A grand narrative was spun from these slim threads that ended, ultimately, in Skeat's argument that this artifact points to a second-century four Gospel codex, and in an assertion by Stanton that this "second-century four-Gospel codex" was not an innovation, but evidence for yet earlier, lost examples of the same. Nongbri compellingly shows that every bit of the story is dubious: the codices have no archaeological provenance, the *terminus ante quem* provided by the fragments' re-use as binding

material is a simple mis-reading of the original publication's account, and the second-century paleographic date is, at best, possible. This chapter demonstrates once again that going back to primary sources holds promise. In this case, a set of presumptions by early commentators on these fragments led to the fabrication of a theory that is a simulacrum of faulty scholarship rather than an account of the evidence. Quite apart from a reactionary and revisionist reading of the materials, Nongbri offers throughout the book a plea for dispassionate reason, and for fresh eyes on old problems tempered by a healthy dose of critical self-understanding. Chapter 7 ends with a maxim that would be well-placed as an inscription on the door of any scholar working with early Christian manuscripts: "The first step toward the production of reliable knowledge about these early Christian manuscripts is to be honest about what we *do not* know" (268, emphasis original).

Nongbri makes a compelling case for the promise of "museum archaeology," or the possibility of finding scraps of information about papyrological provenance within records in museum and library collections. A good portion of the book comprises a modern history of the way that the most important Christian papyri came to light. The light fades, inevitably, at the door of the antiquities dealer responsible for selling the papyri to the owners whose name they bear (Beatty, Michigan, Freer, etc.). Nongbri's stories thus are enlightening, but ultimately unsatisfying; the interesting historical data of provenance that might shed significant interpretive light are almost certainly lost. Nongbri tells as much of the story as is possible based on impeccable and intensive archival work, but the questions that really need answering remain. Even

when Nongbri can get close to information about provenance, the white whale always seems to slip away.

This is ultimately a teaching book. Its audience is not university students but scholars of the New Testament and early Christianity who have intimate knowledge of the texts that Nongbri discusses, but little more than a superficial understanding of the tradition of archaeology and codicology standing behind modern access to those texts. The great strength of the discussion is in opening the world of papyrology to the field of New Testament studies in a manner modulated by sober rationality and a firm understanding of the limits of scholarly knowledge. For this reason the book feels disjointed at various points. The reader in need of Chapter 1's *precis* of the field may find herself lost in Chapter 3, 4, and 5's detailed analysis of paleographic comparanda and codicological analysis if she has not had a good bit of time to digest between reading each constituent part. Chapter 4 above all, on the Chester Beatty Biblical papyri, offers a granularity of analysis that supposes a level of skill on the part of the reader quite a bit beyond what is presented in Chapter 1. It may be the case that the (admittedly superb) introduction will suffice to prepare any reader reaching chapter four for the level of detail and sophistication of analysis. But I remain skeptical that the same reader who finds valuable new information in one chapter will be at a level presupposed by the other.

Nongbri's book is a major contribution. If it is successful in refocusing scholarly attention on the networks of trade and relation that stand between the ancient scribe and the modern critical edition, it will remain a major contribution rather than a methodological aberration.

This, I think, is Nongbri's intention: to offer a model of scholarship to be taken up by future researchers, who will cull new data from old archives and push Nongbri's own conclusions further, or perhaps aside. It is an extraordinary example of scholarly humility intermixed with immense learning, and it deserves a prominent space on the bookshelf of any reader interested in ancient Christianity.

### *Daily Life in Late Antiquity*

KRISTINA SESSA

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 250. ISBN 978-0-521-14840-5

Reviewed by Jonathan P. Conant  
(Brown University)

Despite a flurry of scholarly interest in Late Antiquity in recent decades, until now no general study has systematically surveyed daily life throughout the Mediterranean world in this period. Kristina Sessa's engaging new study admirably fills that gap. Focusing specifically on ca. 250–600 CE, Sessa writes for students and general readers, and her text assumes no prior knowledge of ancient history. The book does not so much advance an argument as describe a layered and complex social world, at once strange and familiar, characterized by both dynamism and decay, which is of interest not just for its connections with the classical past or the medieval future, but in its own right.

In this world, daily life moved primarily to the rhythms of the countryside, where most people lived. Across a territory as vast and varied as that of the later Roman empire, there was considerable diversity in the local organization of communities and the social networks that bound them together, but peasant cultivators everywhere focused on raising staples such as wheat, olives, grapes,