

Brent Nongbri, *God’s Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts*, Yale University Press, 2018. ISBN 9780300215410. Hardcover, pp. Xii + 403. 73 b/w illustrations. \$35.00.

- [1] Brent Nongbri manages to present archeological facts and central lessons on the dating of manuscripts in a way that is beneficial to the interested public and scholars of adjunct fields alike. For the former, he shows what material the Greek text of many modern New Testament translations is based on. For the latter, the book is a compendium to enhance or refresh knowledge about the manufacturing and transmission of ancient Christian literature in Egypt until today and serves as a wake-up call on how problematic and incomplete our understanding of these aspects might be without being noticed by a majority of biblical scholars. This happens in a form easy to digest for both groups because Nongbri straightforwardly presents his research and builds on the already established conclusions he made in the course of his book.
- [2] The book starts with an engaging story in its prologue about discoveries by Charles Lang Freer at the beginning of the twentieth century and the subsequent media-echo, which focused the public attention on biblical manuscripts and their alleged proximity to their date of composition. This problematic dating of the manuscripts and the little information we have about many early Christian books is subsequently problematized. Here we learn that many things we consider as hard facts about the age and the provenience of early Christian books are not scientifically proven facts but often loose assumptions about the paleographical determination of the date and the text’s archeological origin. This prologue already outlines what one can expect from the whole book. Exciting and enlightening stories about the antiquity trade in nineteenth and twentieth century Egypt and its interaction with western researchers take turns with discussions and criticisms of modern secondary literature and on what can be said with certainty about specific manuscripts from the land on the Nile. As we learn during the reading of this book, it is hard to attain many of these hard facts, if any at all.
- [3] One of the main overall goals with this introduction to the material culture of “God’s library” is to reintroduce “the earliest Christian books as archaeological artifacts” (14). Another purpose which the author addresses at the beginning of his book is terminology. Regarding the naming of the relevant early Christian manuscripts he covers in the book, Nongbri states: “A Christian book is a book containing text that we identify as Christian. Fair enough” (23). But as other reviewers already have observed (as for example, Robyn Walsh), this does not always work for all of the texts covered in this book. The author, for example, examines the *Kestoi* by Julius Africanus, which is a text without any specific Christian content, but which was nevertheless undoubtedly written by a Christian.
- [4] Nongbri separates his presentation of various materials from Egypt into seven chapters. His first chapter (21–46) revolves around the material culture of early Christian books: How were they made? Which materials were utilized? What kind of binding was common? Furthermore, in which ways were these codices used, repaired, and protected from the elements? All these questions get treated in distinct sections. This proves valuable, especially for readers who have not worked with manuscripts or read into these practices before. For more experienced recipients, in turn, this section does not offer much new information besides one or two curiosities.
- [5] In the subsequent chapter (47–82), fittingly called “The Dating Game,” Nongbri introduces us to different ways of determining the age of manuscripts only to show us in the same chapter that the reliability we credit towards these methods is considerably ques-

- tionable when it comes to the majority of early Christian books. Neither paleography nor ink analyses and not even the often-praised radiocarbon analysis can give us a timeframe anywhere close to the results we want them to be and—as Nongbri shows with suitable examples—previous research sometimes liked to convince us it could.
- [6] A third chapter (83–115) further complicates matters. Based on fascinating examples from the dawn of western collections of early Christian books in modern Europe as well as relatively recent stories, we learn that the archaeological clues, which theoretically could be immensely helpful in narrowing down the dates of origin of the manuscripts, are less than ideal. This is because most of the finds do not come from systematic archeological excavations but go through the hands of local antiquity traders. Since these traders generally know what their customers want to hear about the products they sell, we have, at first glance, a vast number of early Christian books found with bodies of deceased monks or in hidden compartments. Only when we investigate deeper into their origins do we realize that we have—most of the time—nothing more than hearsay about the actual circumstances of where they were found. In this part of the book, we are introduced to exciting stories about the search for the truth, sometimes many years after the publication of the manuscripts, and the often puzzling or disappointing results of these later inquiries since they dug up even more questions about the provenience and therefore the presumable age of the manuscripts than answers.
- [7] In the following few chapters, Nongbri digs deeper into different groundbreaking manuscripts and their coming to light. I do not want to spoil all the pleasure of these stories (and most of them are genuinely electrifying) but only give a short account of their contents and structure. Chapter 4 (116–56) treats the *Beatty Biblical Papyri*, its contents, its possible connection to early Christian books in other collections, and, of course, its dubious backstory. A similar structure applies in chapter 5 (157–215), where Nongbri delivers comparable information on the heterogenic contents of the *Bodmer Papyri*. Chapter 6 marks some kind of an exception since the “Christian litter and literature at Oxyrhynchus” (216–46) proves too heterogeneous and voluminous for his previously established method. Instead, Nongbri gives an overview and hints towards more in-depth literature and possible future developments when the archaeological documents of the leading excavators, Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, get published soon.
- [8] The seventh and final chapter (247–68) shows in a case par excellence how dubious information regarding the archeological context of a discovery, questionable paleographical methods, the desire for media attention, and the wish of an as early as possible date for a material object can lead towards the fabrication of a second-century Codex of the Four Gospels. For the last time, Nongbri presents us his meticulous attention towards detail during his detective research into the genesis of a few fragments presented to the general public by the Times as an “eyewitness record of the life of Christ” (253). That this whole sensation was built on sand in Nongbri’s eyes is presumably needless to say at this point. It cannot be stressed enough here how the truly investigative nature of Nongbri’s research is beneficial for this book, which is, for example, evident in the accurate analysis of “one of the early photographs of Nag Hammadi Codex VI taken before the codices were disassembled” (260), where we can see some loose sheets inserted into the pages of the book in the background. This proves Nongbri’s point that leaves put into larger seemingly unrelated manuscripts was not an uncommon practice in late antiquity.
- [9] Therefore, the overall takeaway from his book is—as Nongbri also admits in his epilogue—a negative one, a constant “we can not know this” (269). Although he tries to end on a positive note with the possibilities of academic cooperation, museum arche-

ology, and digitalization, the reader leaves with a feeling that most of the things older standard literature on the topic makes us believe as more or less facts cannot be proven with certainty. Even if other introductory manuals also mention these uncertainties, the study presented here makes the deficiencies of dating and locating early Christian books even more apparent. While pointing out these insufficiencies of earlier archeologists and researchers, Nongbri is also not always entirely fair towards his long-deceased counterparts and sometimes requires unrealistic scientific standards, which were just not widely common at their time (see, for example, 95). Additionally, one hopes for future publications by Nongbri on the fascinating questions that arise from his data, which he states but neither cursorily answers nor refers to the relevant literature (see for a prime example on 246)—especially when the present book is so scarce with answers.

- [10] On the other hand, the short and loaded conclusions Nongbri gives in the majority of his chapters are immensely valuable. This may be why the author of this review wishes for more of this. Additionally, the maps, pictures, and illustrations used in the present book are exceptionally helpful and used in excellent moderation to help the reader understand the geography of ancient Egypt, the scope of the fragments discussed, and the various contents of the different finds.
- [11] Overall, this book is beneficial for everyone who wants to learn more about “God’s Library,” consisting of the earliest Christian manuscripts in Egypt, and who is not afraid to leave with more answers and uncertainties than he or she came.

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