

PAULINE ALLEN – BRONWEN NEIL, *Greek and Latin Letters in Late Antiquity: The Christianisation of a Literary Form*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020. 189 pp. – ISBN 978-1-316-51013-1, 978-1-316-64950-3.

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In the last decade, scholarly interest in late antique epistolography has increased significantly. In addition to numerous papers on individual authors and letter collections, three recent monographs have considerably expanded our knowledge of Latin and Greek literary letters of the 4th–6th centuries. The first of them examines the most significant letter collections of Christian authors from the Apostle Paul until the 6th century.¹ The second is a series of essays on letter collections of Greek and Latin authors from the 4th to the 6th century, focusing on the process of formation and transmission of these collections and investigating their structure and manuscript tradition.² The third monograph is the subject of this review.

This monograph covers Greek and Latin letters from 300 to 600 CE, written by both pagan and Christian authors. Unlike the two aforementioned monographs, the book under discussion takes into account letters that have survived not only in letter collections, but also in other sources – e.g., in the *acta* of councils. The focus is on “literary letters”, which means that purely business letters that have come down to us in papyri are not considered and are used only as a background. ALLEN and NEIL investigate the “nature, function, dissemination and transmission” of late antique “Greek and Latin literary letters” (p. 2), and the content of the book is quite consistent with this task. The monograph includes six chapters, an epilogue and two appendices, which I will examine in detail.

Chapter 1, entitled “Introduction to Late Antique Letters” (pp. 1–23), begins with a review of scholarship on ancient epistolography. ALLEN and NEIL touch upon some long discussed theoretical questions, e.g.: What is

1. BRONWEN NEIL – PAULINE ALLEN (eds), *Collecting Early Christian Letters. From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity*. Cambridge, 2015.

2. CRISTIANA SOGNO – BRADLEY K. STORIN – EDWARD J. WATTS (eds), *Letter Collections in Late Antiquity. A Critical Introduction and Reference Guide*. Oakland, CA, 2017.

a letter? Can we apply the term “genre” to ancient and Medieval letter-writing? How relevant is the traditional division into literary epistles and private letters? Next, the authors offer an overview of early Christian and late antique epistolography and propose a general “taxonomy” of letters, to which I will return later.

In Chapter 2 (“The Christianisation of the Late Antique Letter-Form”, pp. 24–46) ALLEN and NEIL raise another important question: how and to what extent Christianity transformed the ancient epistolary genre. On the one hand, they rightly note that “the ‘pagan – Christian divide’ in epistolographical activity was perhaps not as wide as many would have us think” (p. 33). On the other hand, they demonstrate that Christian authors “added their own flavour” (p. 34) to the main epistolographical *topoi* of the Classical antiquity. In this aspect, ALLEN and NEIL analyze some etiquette motives of late antique letter-writing: illusion of a friend’s presence, the letter as an image of the soul, reproach for silence, etc.

The subject of Chapter 3 (“Preservation and Transmission”, pp. 47–69) are letter collections, and methods of their formation and transmission. The authors list the questions that should be asked when examining a letter collection. Several main types of letter collections are identified based on who compiled a collection (the author, addressees, post-enlightenment editors etc.) and what was its purpose. ALLEN and NEIL show that many late antique collections are fragmentary: they cite several cases when we know that a letter was written, but it has not reached us. Attention is also paid to the problem of forged and pseudepigraphical letters, which was quite topical at the period.

In Chapter 4 (“Letter-Types and Their Uses”, pp. 70–93) ALLEN and NEIL “turn to the letters themselves” (p. 69) and their multiple functions, and carry out a classification of late antique Christian letters, dividing them into three general groups: “episcopal”, “monastic”, and “imperial”. Episcopal letters, the most extensive of these categories, are further divided into a large number of types, including administrative, pastoral, festive, and many others. The papal decretals are examined in particular detail. The authors emphasize that some of these types were borrowed from the previous tradition, and some were innovative. The classification as a whole seems to be problematic, as I will discuss later.

Chapter 5 (“Difficulties in Spreading the Word”, pp. 94–115) traces the process of delivery and receipt of letters. ALLEN and NEIL describe some routes used by letter-bearers, and outline difficulties and dangers associated

with letter delivery. They emphasize the important role of carriers, whose task was not only to deliver the letter, but also to convey the oral message to the addressee. Of particular interest are authors' observations on the social status of letter-carriers.

In Chapter 6 ("Networks and Communities of Readers", pp. 116–143) the authors concentrate on the social networks of late antique letter writers. This approach has only recently begun to be applied to late antique and Byzantine epistolography, and much remains to be explored. For example, ALLEN and NEIL rightly point out that the epistolary networks of the 6th-century bishops are poorly studied, and therefore pay more attention to them than to those of their predecessors. They distinguish five types of epistolary networks of late antique authors: 1. "Letters between elites"; 2. "Letters between leaders, especially bishops, and their communities"; 3. "Letters between teachers and students"; 4. "Letters to imperial men and women"; 5. "Letters written by women, addressed to them by men, or letters between women".

In the Epilogue (pp. 144–152) the authors summarize their research and focus on the theme of gifts accompanying letters: they specify the kind of presents usually sent with letters, they examine the role of gifts in the epistolary ceremony, and they explore how this aspect of letter-exchange was influenced by Christianity. Appendix I (pp. 153–155) provides the chronology of the most important "ecclesiastical events" from the 3rd to the 8th century. Appendix 2 (pp. 156–159) contains a list of late antique letter-writers, which are distributed into five groups: 1. "Roman and Byzantine Emperors"; 2. "Bishops of Rome"; 3. "Bishops of Constantinople"; 4. "Other Significant Christian Letter-Writers"; 5. "Other Notable Letter-Writers".

The monograph is a comprehensive analysis of late antique epistolography as a historical, social and literary phenomenon. What materials were used for letter-writing, how letters were delivered, copied and archived, how epistolary collections were formed, what were the functions of letters, how correspondence formed social networks in Late Antiquity – these and other aspects of epistolography are considered in detail. Numerous sources and secondary literature has been taken into account. The structure of the book is clear and logical, and the conclusions are well substantiated. However, the book gives rise to a number of questions and comments of both general and specific nature.

I will start with general comments concerning the two classifications of letters that are developed in Chapters 1 and 4. Before considering each of

them separately, let us note one common feature: both systems take into account only letters of Christian authors. Meanwhile, the subject of the book is all “literary letters” of the 4th–6th centuries, including the correspondence of pagan authors. In this regard, it would have been important to establish how the numerous letters of Libanius, Julian the Apostate, Symmachus and other non-Christian authors should be classified.

According to the first classification (pp. 11–21), late antique Christian letters fall into the following categories: 1) Dissenting voices; 2) Spiritual, Pastoral and Mystical Letters; 3) Administrative letters; 4) Papal letters; 5) Administrative Letters from Exile; 6) Festal letters; 7) Conciliar letters; and 8) Dogmatic and Polemical letters. There are two problems with this classification. First, although the types are formulated in extremely general terms, they leave out a significant number of extant texts. Namely, all the epistles that the authors call “pure friendship letters” (p. 120) in Chapter 6 cannot be included in this system. The letters where late antique authors complain of separation from friends, reproach them for their silence, rejoice at the letter they have received, thank for the gifts, and so on, have been preserved in considerable numbers in the letter collections of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzos, Prokopios of Gaza and other authors. Second, different letter types are distinguished on different basis. So, the types 2), 3), 5), 6), 8) are distinguished according to the purpose of the letter or the epistolary situation; 1) according to author’s ideological positions; 4) according to author’s social status; and 7) according to the methods of transmission. As a result, a situation arises where many letters belong to more than one type. So, for example, Nestorius’ letters contained in the *acta* of the Third Ecumenical Council can be attributed to three groups at once – 1), 7) and 8). The letters of Severus of Antioch, all of them belonging to category 1), can also be distributed among other categories – mainly 2), 5) and 8). The authors themselves repeatedly note that these categories overlap with each other (pp. 11, 12, 22, 23), but such significant overlap could have been avoided if all the types were distinguished on the same basis. The classification of letters by purpose and epistolary situation (i.e., friendship letters, consolation letters, spiritual letters, administrative letters, polemical letters etc.) seems to be much more apposite. Such an approach would have been best suited to the goal of the monograph – to show the variety of functions of late antique epistolography.

Now I will proceed to the second classification, which is presented in Chapter 4. Letters of Christian authors are grouped into three broad categories, based on the author’s social status: episcopal letters, monastic letters, and

imperial letters. This classification creates some difficulties. The first difficulty is similar to that of the first taxonomy: the three categories do not cover the entire corpus of late antique Christian letters that are known to us. Indeed, the letters of Aeneas and Procopios of Gaza, who were neither monks nor bishops, remain outside of this classification; many of Synesios' letters written before his ordination to bishop in 411, when Synesios led a completely secular lifestyle far from monastic asceticism, cannot be placed into any of these categories either. The second problem is that it is difficult to draw any clear line between monastic and episcopal letters. On the one hand, both of them often perform the same functions – they give spiritual instruction, interpret theological issues, provide consolation, and so on. On the other hand, many bishops were also monks, and the methodological question arises as to how to classify their correspondence. For example, several dozens of Basil's letters were written before his ordination, when he led a monastic life. Should we attribute this part to monastic letters, and consider the rest of his epistles as episcopal? It seems that such a division would be artificial, since many letters from both groups are similar in subject matter, style and function. The letters of Paulinus of Nola present a similar problem: though most of Paulinus' letters belong to the "monastic" period of his life, some were written when he was a bishop. In any case, is it necessary to divide letters according to author's social status, if most of the types (friendship, comforting, polemical, recommending etc.) were used equally by monks, bishops, and other Christian and pagan authors? It should be emphasized that the authors who were members of different social categories, but belonged to the same Greco-Roman intellectual elite, wrote such letters according to the same rules.

Let us move on to specific comments. Some assessments made by ALLEN and NEIL seem problematic or not sufficiently substantiated. Regarding Classical letter types, ALLEN and NEIL give a brief survey of the ancient and early medieval letter-writing theory. Among other treatises on epistolography, they also mention the "Epistolary Styles" of Pseudo-Libanios (p. 7), in which, as we know, 41 letter-types are enumerated. However, this treatise dates to the 4th or 5th century and belongs to the very period that the book explores. Therefore, the treatise should have been mentioned not only in the introduction, but also analyzed in detail in Chapter 4 on epistolary types. When categorizing letters, it is important to take into account the views the bearers of the tradition.

In discussing epistolary networks of Christian authors, ALLEN and NEIL emphasize the following point: "One of the greatest innovations of the

Christian letter was that it could be addressed to people whom one did not already know. Previously, elite correspondence was carried out with known people who were absent”... (p. 116) And further: “Unlike Classical letter-writers, who always wrote to people they were already acquainted with, Christian friendship letters in the late fourth and fifth centuries could also be addressed to strangers, with the presumption of friendship based on a common faith” (p. 119). Perhaps all the letters of classical authors that have come down to us (i.e., a tiny fraction of them) are addressed only to familiar people, but there is reason to believe that the custom of writing friendship letters to strangers already existed in pre-Christian times, at least in Greek epistolography. It is recorded in the letter-writing manual of Pseudo-Demetrios (1th c. BCE / 1th c. CE), where we read: “The friendly (letter-)type, then, is one that seems to be written by a friend to a friend. But it is by no means (only) friends who write (in this manner). For frequently those in prominent positions are expected by some to write in a friendly manner to their inferiors and to others who are their equals... There are times, indeed, when they write to them without knowing them (personally)”.³

In the same chapter, ALLEN and NEIL note that Christian authors often corresponded with pagans, and that “there were overlapping communities of letter-writers where religious difference was not the primary focus... However, as Christians’ religious identities began to consolidate towards the end of the fourth century, we find that the overlaps become fewer. Christians now write more often to fellow Christians” (pp. 120–121). In general, it is difficult to disagree that this occurred, but the fact that the change takes place by the end of the 4th century requires a more detailed analysis. In addition, the wording “more often” prompts the question: “How often?” It would be important to show that epistolary networks of 4th-century authors contain a higher percentage of pagan correspondents than networks of the following period. However, it is difficult to carry out such a calculation, since the religion of many addressees from the 4th and 5th centuries remains uncertain. Is it then possible to confidently assert that the shift in “communication strategy” occurred by the end of the 4th century?

My final remarks concern Appendix 2. There is some discrepancy between the main text of the book and the list of letter-writers. In Chapter 6, char-

3. VALENTIN WEICHERT (ed.) *Demetrii et Libanii qui feruntur Τύποι ἐπιστολικοί et Ἐπιστολιμαῖοι χαρακτῆρες*. Lipsiae, 1910, pp.2.19–3.1. Transl. by ABRAHAM J. MALHERBE, *Ancient epistolary theorists (Sources for Biblical Studies 19)*. Atlanta, Ga 1988.

acterizing the epistolary networks of the 6th-century bishops, ALLEN and NEIL note: “From patriarchs of Constantinople, we have only two surviving writers: John of Cappadocia and Epiphanius” (p. 127). Yet, in the list of patriarchs of Constantinople, where, as it is specially noted, “only those who wrote surviving letters are included” (p. 158), we find five patriarchs of the 6th century: John II the Cappadocian (s. 518–20), Epiphanius (s. 520–35), Anthimus (s. 535–6), Menas (s. 536–52) and Eutychiu (s. 552–65, 577–82). Are Anthimus, Menas and Eutychiu included in the list because they were *addressees* of extant letters? In this case, it should have been stated that the list contains not only authors, but also recipients of letters. In my opinion, it would have been worthwhile to have included in the list only the authors of surviving letters, providing, in addition to dates, other information about them, such as the number of letters known to us and references to their editions, similarly to the list of authors in *Epistularum Byzantinarum Initia*.⁴

The shortcomings mentioned above do not diminish the value of the monograph. ALLEN and NEIL’s book is a useful companion to late antique epistolography. It summarizes all the research concerning Latin and Greek letters of this period and shows what remains to be explored. Along with the monograph by SOGNO, STORIN and WATTS on epistolary collections and the new *Companion to the Byzantine Epistolography*,⁵ this book is an important contribution to the study of late antique and medieval letter-writing.

Keywords

epistolography; Late Antiquity

4. MICHAEL GRÜNBART, *Epistularum Graecarum Initia usque ad annum MD* (Alpha-Omega. Reihe A 265). Hildesheim – New York, Olms 2020, pp. XIII–LXIX.

5. ALEXANDER RIEHLE (ed.) *A Companion to Byzantine Epistolography* (Brill’s Companions to the Byzantine World 7). Leiden – Boston 2020.