**Inside Roman Libraries: Book Collections and Their Management in Antiquity**. By George W. Houston. Pp. xviii, 327. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press. 2014. £47.50 (HB). ISBN 9781469617800.

The material and organizational side of libraries in Greco-Roman antiquity cannot be simply taken for granted. It is clear that the prevalent physical format of an ancient book was the papyrus roll, but how were the rolls actually arranged, stored, and handled? George Houston offers a thorough and judicious discussion of the evidence about contents and management of book collections that belong in the cultural – as well as historical and geographical – macrocosm of the Roman empire. He devotes his central chapters to the famous haul of carbonized book rolls in the Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum and to several clusters (“concentrations”) of literary papyri from Oxyrhynchus; the library holdings among the educated residents of Egypt during the Roman era are further illustrated through a small handful of papyri containing lists of Greek books. From these different sets of often tantalizingly tricky papyrological data (tabulated and annotated in the appendices) Houston arrives at prudent conclusions. While some Greco-Roman book collectors were satisfied with the staple classics, others owned more specialized literature which reflected their interests in e.g. medicine, philosophy, or rhetoric; a typical assortment of texts would be selective to the point of “significant gaps” (p. 101) and even randomness, yet the book rolls themselves tend to be professionally produced copies rather than in-house transcripts; textual correctness was generally aimed for. The second half of the monograph focuses on Roman libraries, both provincial and metropolitan, as spaces and institutions. Houston’s fascinating account encompasses shelving and furniture, architectural layout, interior décor, and the roles of high- and low-ranking library staff who acted, inter alia, as “a kind of human catalogue” (p. 259) for the collection.

The overall academic worth of this book, which expands upon Houston’s previously published shorter studies, is enormous. An up-to-date holistic appraisal of the realia of ancient libraries will benefit classical scholars and non-specialists alike. The latter might feel somewhat overwhelmed by the papyrological details in chs. 2-4, but chs. 1, 5, and 6 are guaranteed to appeal to any bibliophile. Indeed it is the less well known and unknown minutiae of the ancient book users’ experience that Houston zooms in so successfully – for example, the precautions against paper lice (pp. 109-10 n108, p. 184 n14, p. 230) or finding water, as necessary for scribal activities, inside a major library (p. 204). One unfortunate instance of misinterpretation is the anonymous librarian of Marcus Aurelius’ letter to Fronto (p. 250): because the Latin verb *subigito* suggests a sexual favour (see Michel P. J. van den Hout, *A Commentary on the Letters of M. Cornelius Fronto* (Leiden 1999), 171; James N. Adams, *The* *Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London 1982), 155-6) rather than a bribe, the whole passage should be read as naughty banter between the elite literati. Needless to say, this does not compromise Houston’s mastery of the primary sources; the recently discovered treatise by Galen is on the radar throughout alongside the canonical informants such as Cicero or Pliny the Younger. The argument is lucidly written, signposted, and usefully indexed. There are a number of relevant images, however, the photos of the five key papyri in ch. 2 defy legibility.

Houston’s approach is vigorously factual and level-headed, at times with a Sherlockian touch. His ample caveats about the interpretability of papyri are stimulating in their own right. And yet the core premise of Houston’s study, namely that we should look for the common denominator(s) between book collections across the Roman empire (p. 2, p. 4, p. 48, etc), risks losing sight of the manifold regional differences and, crucially, disparities in resources which willy-nilly translate into intellectual and ideological environment. Houston altogether avoids talking about the ideological dimension of Greco-Roman libraries as hubs of literary culture and the socio-political implications thereof (signally, Yun Lee Too’s latest monograph *The Idea of Library in the Ancient World* (Oxford 2010) does not feature in his bibliography.) Which is fair enough, but a “thick” description ought to engage with the broader cultural mood of the period too. Thus, the presence of book rolls over a hundred years old in several extant collections of papyri proves and mirrors the imperial readers’ appetite for antique texts qua artefacts – a trend that unscrupulous booksellers were known to exploit (Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 21 ch. 12; Lucian, *Ignorant Book-Collector* ch. 1), but equally a facet of the pervasive archaism during the Second Sophistic. It is not surprising that in the book lists preserved on papyri classical Greek authors far outnumber “contemporary” Greek authors; of course the same is statistically true for the totality of literary fragments on papyri. Hence when a relatively recent work is attested as part of a collection, all sorts of interesting questions could be asked. Why a moralizing declamation by Dio Chrysostom and a treatise by the shadowy second-century doctor Theodas (Theudas) of Laodicea in a medley of mainly late classical and Hellenistic philosophical texts (see pp. 55-7, 269-71)? Does the lonely “Anacharsis” surrounded by titles of Platonic dialogues refer to Lucian’s *Anacharsis* (so Houston, p. 72, p. 78, p. 249) or, as I think is more likely, to the apocryphal *Sayings* or *Epistles* of the legendary Scythian sage? It is in any case certain that thanks to Houston’s scholarship the entire debate is going to move onto a new level.

*Dr Alexei V. Zadorojnyi*

*University of Liverpool*