

Libraries and Euergetism: Critical Source Review

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CHRIS MILLER – 1806060

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The evidence for Roman public libraries, and particularly the munificence that brought many of these libraries into being, is regrettably scarce.¹ The limited evidence we do have certainly helps us understand this phenomenon of wealthy donors giving libraries to their communities, but our sources are varied and have their weaknesses as well as their strengths. This paper will outline a few of the most important pieces of evidence available to us, focusing on epigraphic, archaeological and literary sources. It will explain their relevance, and limitations, in our understanding of libraries as munificent donations, and how libraries and munificence combined to communicate a message about their donors. Moreover, it will attempt to show that these sources provide a clearer picture when used in connection with each other.

Epigraphic Sources

The library inscriptions of Timgad and Ephesus provide two basic evidentiary benefits: information about the libraries, and about their donors. The Timgad inscription's greatest benefit is that it positively identified the building as a library, ending speculation as to its function.² It also tells us that Rogatianus, the donor, spent 400,000 sesterces on the library.³ As an act of euergetism, this information is important because it gives us a sense of the library's monetary value relative to other contemporary buildings.⁴ Unfortunately, it does not tell us if this figure covered the cost of the land, staff salaries, or books. And aside from giving his full name, the inscription offers disappointingly few details about Rotatianus himself. Despite these drawbacks, the figure of 400,000 sesterces is clearly considerable,⁵

¹ Woolf, 2013, p. 4.

² Pfeiffer, 1931, p. 157: The unusual curved rear wall caused scholars to speculate that the building might be a shrine or a meeting place, until the inscription was reconstructed, thus eliminating any doubt that it was a library.

³ See Pfeiffer, 1931, p. 159 for a copy of the inscription.

⁴ Duncan-Jones, 1963, pp. 173 ff. gives a summary of various buildings (not just libraries) donated in Roman Africa.

⁵ Zuiderhoek, 2009, p. 27, notes that a subsistence level income for one person was 115 sesterces, so 400,000 sesterces is a significant expenditure.

and this expense is key to understanding the library as an act of munificence: by building in the busiest and most expensive part of Timgad, Rogatianus was attempting to guarantee commemoration though the extravagance of his gift.⁶ Though scant with details, the inscription is nonetheless helpful for what information it does provide about one of the few known provincial libraries in the western provinces. In addition, it brings to light the otherwise unknown name of Rogatianus⁷, and suggests the importance of connecting an act of munificence to a specific donor.

The Ephesus inscriptions (there are several, in both Greek and Latin) are far more helpful, because they provide more details—not only on the cost of the library building itself, but also on salaries and book purchases.⁸ Moreover, they offer some specific details about the careers of the donor, Tiberius Julius Aquila Polemaeanus, and his father, Tiberius Julius Celsus Polemaeanus, to whom the library was dedicated.⁹ Finally, and most significantly, this inscription offers details about the commemorative activities held in honour of Celsus at the library.¹⁰ These details are important, not just for what they tell us about the running of a library, but also for preserving details that help us comprehend the extraordinary costs of euergetism.¹¹ Nichols emphasized that these inscriptions are crucial in understanding euergetism's link to commemoration: "The long foundation inscription is particularly interesting ... The family's foundation was intended to be not just a library building, of interest only to a relatively small number of Ephesian intellectuals, but a commemorative, living benefaction, staking out a place for itself in a civic landscape crowded with competing philanthropic structures and events."¹² So, as with the Timgad inscription, the evidence found at Ephesus preserves details about the library, and

⁶ Nichols, 2013, p. 271.

⁷ Pfeiffer, 1931, p. 159.

⁸ König, 2012, p. 2.

⁹ König, 2012, p. 2 and p. 5.

¹⁰ König, 2012, p. 2. Commemorative activities include annual decoration of all the library's statutes and payment to library staff on the date of Celsus' birthday, and thrice-yearly placing of wreaths on the statutes of Celsus.

¹¹ Zuiderhoek, 2009, pp. 24-28 provides details on costs associated with euergetistic donations in Asia Minor which offer a useful comparison with the details found in this library's inscriptions.

¹² Nichols, 2013, p. 270.

the donor, that are available in no other source, and underscore the costly connection between commemoration and euergetism. This connection becomes even clearer when the inscriptions are interpreted along with the archeological remains of the libraries they once adorned.

Archaeological Sources

Archaeology has revealed few, but nonetheless valuable, examples of Roman public libraries. Most important among them is the library found at Ephesus, the façade of which was reconstructed between 1970 and 1978.¹³ Several scholars have noted that the interior of the reconstructed building is far less impressive than the exterior.¹⁴ Not only was the two-storey marble façade decorated with statues, columns and aediculae, but it also incorporated optical illusions to make the library look wider than it actually was.¹⁵ The library was built at a later date than the buildings on either side of it, forcing the donor to make the most of the space available to him.¹⁶ In fact, his use of space indicates that he wanted to maximise the library's impact on viewers in order to enhance the commemoration of his father.¹⁷ For example, the library's ornate, two-storey, marble façade creates a spectacular setting for the numerous statues of Celsus found there. The statues make an explicit link between the library and the man it commemorated, which even illiterate passers-by were sure to notice.¹⁸ More important still, the library was built as a tomb for Celsus, even though burial within a city was generally forbidden, except in very rare cases when special honours were bestowed upon a person.¹⁹ The overall effect is a monument to Celsus that almost overshadows the building's role as a library—almost. It would be a

¹³ Strocka, 2003, p. 36.

¹⁴ Strocka, 2003, p. 33; Nichols, 2013, p. 270; König, 2012, p. 4.

¹⁵ Strocka, 2003, p. 36; Erdemgil, 2006, p. 86. Specifically, the columns, capitals, and rafters at on the edges of the façade are slightly smaller than those of the centre. Thus, as one goes up the steps to the library, the smaller decorations on the edges give the illusion of being further away than they actually are.

¹⁶ Erdemgil, 2006, p. 86.

¹⁷ Nichols, 2013, p. 269.

¹⁸ Nichols, 2013, p. 269.

¹⁹ Strocka, 2003, p. 39.

mistake to overlook the importance of the building as a library, as Alice König points out: "Celsus' library highlights ... the symbolic capital of literature and intellectual culture. Celsus and his family could have found other ways to commemorate themselves. That they chose to be remembered above all as literary benefactors ... testifies not just to their personal interests but also to the high value of literary activity as a currency in the quest for fame and influence."²⁰ The archaeological remains of the library of Celsus are key to understanding euergetism as a force in local politics. Even rebuilt from ruins, they give a stunning visual representation of the lengths (and, as the inscriptions indicate, the expense) to which families would go to present themselves as worthy of recognition, honour, and influence.

Timgad stands out as the only archaeological excavation in the western provinces that has revealed a public library.²¹ Though it is not possible to rebuild this library to the same extent as the one in Ephesus, it nonetheless provides details that make it valuable for our understanding of both libraries and euergetism. First of all, the surviving architectural detail indicates that the building was impressive: in addition to a colonnaded portico with mosaic floor, the library was decorated with accents such as spiral fluted columns near the coloured-marble statute niche, and, most remarkably, boasted a semi-circular back wall, echoed by a semi-domed roof.²² In addition, the library took up an entire block near the intersection of the town's *Cardo* and *Decumanus*, and was close to major public sites, such as the forum, theatre and *macellum*.²³ The impressive architecture and decoration, considered along with the highly accessible location, suggest a structure that was meant to be seen by all, not just used by scholars, as Nichols notes: "The neat, even elegant building, with its semicircular book room and helical columns, shows a degree of architectural flair and innovation consonant with its eye-catching location..."²⁴ Though not as extravagant, the Timgad library was nonetheless similar to the Ephesus

²⁰ König, 2012, pp. 6-7.

²¹ Casson, 2001, p. 119.

²² Pfeiffer, 1931, pp.

²³ Nicholls, 2013, p. 271.

²⁴ Nicholls, 2013, p. 272.

library in its use of expensive architecture, its very public location, and its association with literary benefaction. The remains of these two libraries, along with their inscriptions, show how donors used euergetism as a means to project an image of themselves that would be long remembered.

Literary Sources

Literary sources make a fair number of references to libraries, but only one refers to them in the context of euergetism. This is Pliny the Younger's letter to Pompeius Saturninus (1.8), in which he asks his friend to review the speech he (Pliny) gave at the opening of his library in Comum. Pliny explains that he is hesitant to publish the speech, as doing so might make him seem self-aggrandizing.²⁵ I find this letter interesting because it presents a different aspect self-presentation than found in inscriptions and archaeological evidence—here the issue is, how far benefactors could go in seeking recognition before they started to appear insincere or obsequious. Pliny seems genuinely concerned about this issue, going so far as delivering his speech to Comum's town council rather than to the population at large, in order to avoid appearing to court public favour.²⁶ However, as the library of Ephesus demonstrates, the sheer lavishness of some benefactions, and the obvious link between the gift and the donor (or donor's family), suggests insincerity and obsequiousness were the last things on some donors' minds. Pliny's dilemma, then, has to be examined carefully: perhaps his letter is full of false modesty, or perhaps he really was less self-aggrandizing than other benefactors. Roy K. Gibson sees the former in letter 1.8: "...he puts himself on display as one who 'properly' agonised in private about praising himself in public."²⁷ Though clearly problematic, this letter is our only direct literary account of a library donor discussing his benefaction, and it is valuable for demonstrating the dilemma donors faced when considering their need to earn praise versus their need to show modesty.

²⁵ Plin. Ep. 1.8.4.

²⁶ Plin. Ep. 1.8.17.

²⁷ Gibson, 2003, p. 243.

There is of course more evidence available to help us understand libraries as munificent donations, though it is not possible to discuss it all here. The epigraphic, archaeological, and literary sources presented in this paper are our most important evidence, primarily for their directness as examples of library euergetism. The inscriptions provide us with clear evidence of the exceptional costs donors incurred—costs which the donors chose to make public in order to showcase their generosity. As our most complete examples of ancient libraries, the archaeological evidence from Timgad and Ephesus give modern viewers at least a sense of the impact they would have had in antiquity. Combined with the epigraphic evidence, Timgad and Ephesus offer us the fullest picture of ancient libraries that we have, showing us not only how they looked, but also who donated them and at what cost. Combined, they offer a powerful statement on the importance wealthy Romans placed on communicating a particular image of themselves, and making sure that image would be long remembered. Finally, Pliny's letter further underscores this preoccupation with self-image, and demonstrates the fact that wealthy Romans were at least aware of the possibility that showcasing their generosity might diminish, rather than enhance, their image. The fact that Pliny's preoccupation with this issue centres on his donation of a library is further evidence that libraries were not just storehouses for books, but rather communicated a message to all who saw them. Taken together, these evidentiary sources help illuminate the euergetism that underlay the creations of many ancient Roman libraries.

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