

Alan Mugridge, *Copying Early Christian Texts: A Study of Scribal Practise*. WUNT 362; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016. Pp. XX+558. Hardback ISBN: 978-3-16-154688-4, E-book ISBN: 978-3-16-154760-7. €159.-.

- [1] This book is a thorough and scholarly investigation into the people who copied early Christian manuscripts, using evidence from within the manuscripts themselves. Mugridge surveys nearly 550 pre-fifth-century manuscripts, including a comparison group that does not carry Christian texts. He divides the manuscripts into categories based on their contents, analyses their handwriting, and then ranks the handwriting for its proficiency and skill. He then analyses the correlations between content, handwriting level, and date. He demonstrates that many Christian manuscripts were copied by highly competent scribes.
- [2] Mugridge begins by outlining his methods and introducing his selection of manuscripts. He then briefly surveys the external evidence for the scribes of early Christian texts. He then explains his method of classifying the handwriting. He uses the work of William A. Johnson to identify features of a highly trained scribal hand. There are three principal features: regularity of letter-size and placement, writing the letters on an even line, and use of a book-hand. Critics of Mugridge might argue that “neatness” of handwriting is a subjective concept and that there is no reason to think that the ancients would have shared our modern aesthetic of handwriting. However, one cannot produce Mugridge’s three features without time and skill, and there would seem to be no reason to have expended that time and developed that skill other than because these features were attractive and made reading easier. Moreover the three features are objective: letters either are evenly sized or they are not. Thus Mugridge has produced a helpful and convincing method to assess the handwriting level of a manuscript. The results show that a large number of Christian texts appear to have been copied by accomplished scribes, who were probably professionals. Manuscripts with liturgical texts are a slight exception.
- [3] Mugridge defends the validity of his method by demonstrating that his criteria for good handwriting frequently correlate with other plausible indicators of scribal training. He discusses the content, material, format (roll, codex, or sheet) and page size of the manuscripts and concludes that particular handwriting styles conform to these other properties in unsurprising ways. For example, manuscripts with multiple languages are generally copied by scribes with accomplished hands, suggesting, as we would expect, that linguistic education goes with scribal education. An intriguing finding in this section is that a number of Christian texts were copied in good handwriting, but on to low quality surfaces, such as reused papyri. Mugridge suggests the explanation is that sometimes even skilled copyists had to use what materials they could find.
- [4] Mugridge then considers page layout and size of column. Unsurprisingly, multiple columns and wide margins generally correlate with skillful handwriting, though single-sheet manuscripts are an exception to this rule. Mugridge then considers reading aids, such as punctuation, accentuation, and pagination. He

finds that there is little correlation between high-quality handwriting and these devices. One might expect a highly trained scribe to make more use of reading aids, but Mugridge suggests that in fact scribes quite possibly simply copied what was before them, so that if the exemplar did not include reading aids, neither did the scribe.

- [5] In his final substantive chapter, Mugridge considers a miscellany of textual and paratextual matters. He finds that critical signs, such as *obeli*, occur, predictably enough, predominantly with high-quality handwriting—only skilled scribes were aware of textual variants. Likewise predictably, stichometric marks tend only to occur with good writing—only professionals expected to get paid. On the other hand, corrections and nonstandard orthography and itacisms are found in manuscripts of every handwriting level.
- [6] Mugridge comes to some particularly interesting conclusions regarding *nomina sacra*: variations and inconsistencies in *nomina sacra* do not correlate with either high-quality or low-quality handwriting. Mugridge builds on this finding to challenge a widely-held and important, but quite possibly false, assumption, that *nomina sacra* indicate a Christian scribe. There is no reason why a Christian could not have instructed a professional scribe to follow the practise of *nomina sacra*. Mugridge makes the point that the magical papyri frequently contain unusual symbols, which scribes could presumably copy from one manuscript to the next, so presumably they could do the same with *nomina sacra*.
- [7] The bulk of the book, in sheer weight of pages, is Mugridge's excellent catalogue. For nearly 550 manuscripts, Mugridge gives provenance, contents, location, date, thorough bibliography (including details of plates), and comments on the quality of the handwriting. Quite apart from its role in Mugridge's own arguments, this is an extremely useful research tool, which papyrologists, textual critics, palaeographers, and scholars of many kinds will find useful to consult, not least because it points quickly to useful bibliography and images.
- [8] In his conclusion, Mugridge argues that his findings suggest that many scribes of Christian manuscripts were paid professionals, who were not necessarily Christians. Mugridge argues that, therefore, contra Bart Ehrman and others, it is unlikely that deliberate theological alterations to the text were common, because the scribes were probably mostly non-Christians, with little interest in the content. Mugridge's research also challenges the influential work of Kim Haines-Eitzen, who argues in her monograph, *Guardians of Letters*, that Christians probably did not engage external professional scribes.
- [9] I would challenge Mugridge's argument on two points. Firstly, it is unclear how he has gathered and selected his manuscripts, particularly in the comparison groups. Regarding the Christian texts, it seems he has simply included everything he could find. The argument would be even more convincing if he had laid out in more detail the method and reasoning behind his search and selection. There is an appendix listing excluded manuscripts, with a brief note on why they were excluded. Frequently the reason is that they did not contain

Christian texts, but it is unclear why they could not have been included in the comparison group.

- [10] Secondly, it is not clear how Mugridge comes to his conclusions regarding textual variation. He attempts to assess to what extent accurate copying correlates with handwriting level, but he does not give details as to how he determines where inaccurate copying has occurred. He cites Royse's work on scribal habits at the start of the section and several times appears to follow Royse in thinking that singular readings are likely to be the result of inaccurate copying. However, Royse's method is significantly less useful outside the New Testament, where there are far fewer surviving manuscripts, which means that it is much less certain that any singular reading was created by the scribe of its manuscript. Mugridge also writes: "For unidentified Christian texts ... there is little relevance in discussing their accuracy, because we do not have a standard text with which to compare them" (141). This seems to imply that Mugridge is not using Royse's method, but instead a method more like that of Min or Barbara Aland, which regards variation from a "standard text" as strong evidence of inaccurate copying. There is no fool-proof method of determining when a scribe copied inaccurately, apart from being able to examine the exemplar, but Mugridge's case would arguably be more persuasive if he had discussed this problem in more detail.
- [11] All in all, however, Mugridge's book is broad in reach, deep in analysis and tight in focus. His thesis is compelling, and he defends it with meticulously detailed consideration of many different manuscripts from widely varying angles. I warmly recommend the book.

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