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Rohmann's "Christianity book-burning and censorship in late antiquity: Studies in text transmission" (critical book review)

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Critical Reviews



Rohmann, D. (2016). *Christianity book-burning and censorship in late antiquity: Studies in text transmission*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press. 360 pp. \$49.95. ISBN 9781481307826

Dirk Rohmann uses *Christianity Book-Burning and Censorship in Late Antiquity* well to address several issues regarding book-burning from Rome's Imperial Age through the early Renaissance. Rohmann's main thesis argues that loss of ancient textual materials resulted from many mechanisms and although book-burning actually occurred other mechanisms resulted in significantly more losses. The usual emphasis on Christian burning of non-Christian materials is quashed by Rohmann's historical analysis of primary and secondary sources which show that although intentional destruction of written materials occurred these losses were less significant than losses due to other factors.

Rohmann clearly elucidates that prior to Christianity, destruction of written materials already occurred on a frequent basis. Once Christianity arrived on the scene, hostile Roman government forces administered most of the destruction of written materials, often at the expense of Christians. Roman fear and distrust of Christians, who never accepted the divine status of earthly rulers and who possessed a Scripture that emphasized the eternal over the earthly, compelled Roman authorities to suppress ideas which they considered to be heretical and divisive to state order. Book-burnings met the requirements of Roman justice which sought forms of punishment which were public in nature and had deterrent effects. Frequently private citizens used governmental decrees and regulations to achieve personal goals. Although direct government forces appear to have been rarely involved the legislative actions of government allowed other elites to destroy controversial works and discourage their possession by the general population. In early antiquity most of the book-burnings that occurred were directed against Christians.

Once Constantine converted to Christianity the open suppression of Christianity halted and a short period of calm ensued. This calm ended when backlashes occurred and later emperors attempted to restore traditional Roman values. The fall of the Roman Empire as a cohesive whole resulted in much accidental destruction of written works of all kinds when vanquished cities lost the books housed in them. At the same time a conversion from scroll-based preservation of written material to

codex-based preservation occurred. This required copying the writing from scrolls to codexes. Rohmann argues that this step is where most of the ancient writings were lost.

With the destruction of the Roman Empire, centers of learning moved from the great cities of the empire to numerous Christian monasteries located in more rural areas. Although this location in rural areas made each monastery more vulnerable it also spread materials out over vast distances and between cultures which lost contact with each other. In early antiquity classics, often written by non-Christian philosophers, were actively preserved and promulgated through a cohesive system of education which relied heavily on classical scholarship. Christian monastics, the new educators, were little interested in classical studies and emphasized Biblical studies in place of the classics. As older works became worn and damaged Christian monastics did not recopy these since there was little need for the classical works in the new education system which emphasized Scripture and practical learning.

The conflict between ancient philosophy and Christianity is well recorded in the early church fathers' attacks on heresies of various types, usually based on one of the earlier philosophical schools. Although a small population of non-Christian philosophers continued to teach and promulgate their views throughout history many eventually converted to Christianity. One of the ways in which conversion could be publically demonstrated was for these philosophers to burn their old written materials and dedicate their new Christian lives to studying Christian Scripture.

Rohmann's book does an excellent job of demonstrating that although a disproportionate amount of non-Christian written work was lost during late antiquity the reason for this loss was not the coercive book-burning advocated by popular lore. Although acknowledging that actual book-burning did occur Rohmann places the book-burning into context and provides a viable explanation for the significantly disproportionate loss of non-Christian materials through this period. The footnotes and bibliography provide valuable resources for the reader. The somewhat limited number of primary sources utilized leaves the reader wondering about how additional sources might change the picture, but this is a minor negative in an otherwise highly useful work. The complex nature of the discussion and the unfamiliarity most readers would have with the ancient sources utilized and the ancient world itself make this a book better suited to undergraduate and higher audiences. This book or portions from it provides good counterpoints to dominant narratives and expands understanding of book loss through the ages for all audiences.

Reviewer

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