

IN PRAISE OF THE
ALEXANDRIAN LIBRARIANS:
PIONEERS IN LITERACY SCHOLARSHIP

by William F. Meehan III



The accomplishments of the ancient Greeks won valued recognition in Western intellectual civilization, few subjects escaping their observation. So with the rise of writing in the fifth century B.C., and after they had pioneered rhetoric, the Greeks turned their attention to the texts transcribed on papyrus scrolls. The center of intellectual activity at the time was Athens, in one of the four schools of philosophy run by Aristotle. However, it was not the reflective thinkers in Athens who delved into the written word on the rolls and gave rise to literary scholarship. It was, instead, the scholarly librarians in the Egyptian city of Alexandria working in what became the greatest Greek library and the paragon of research libraries ever since.

The formal study of literary texts in classical Greece took root in the third and second centuries B.C. with the librarians in Alexandria who served during the reign of the Ptolemies, the learned rulers who took the capital's cultural standing seriously enough to foster a robust intellectual life. Ptolemy I endowed a center for scholarly research and discussion, the Museum, also providing a library where the spirited acquisition policy led to a hoard of rolls, designed mainly to support examination of the classics of Greek literature, particularly Homer. Gathered from the spoils of war and the confiscation of ship cargo, the abundant collection in Alexandria, however, lacked exemplary copies, or authoritative versions, of literary works. Several copies of a work were acquired, each containing a different version of the text, with lines missing or added as well as transposed, along with variants in spelling and diction. Setting up a standard text for these literary works of Greek cultural importance, therefore, was the first scholarly undertaking at the Museum, where several of the librarians were grammarians. The editing and therefore standardizing of literary works that subsequently flourished at the Museum secured its position as an exalted place not only in the history of libraries but also in the history of literary studies. Before long, it grew into a model of skillful editing

where the aim was not producing scholarship but compiling, revising, and correcting it.

The recension and exegesis of literary texts by the librarians was motivated in part by the prevailing mood associated with Hellenism, a movement fixed upon correctness, and in part by the lingering analogical attitude to language, or a view that intrinsic orderliness and regularity informed grammatical paradigms. The auspicious combination inspired a fascination with literary style that developed into textual scholarship, enhanced by the concern with grammatical correctness and correct standards of Greek as tools for producing correct interpretations of classical literature. Called *grammatikoi*, or students of letters, the librarians who pursued literary scholarship did so to serve their discerning textual elucidation and criticism. These early expositors of literary texts were Zenodotus, Aristophanes, and Aristarchus.

The first official head of the great library in Alexandria was Zenodotus, appointed by Ptolemy I in circa 282 B.C. The earliest editor of Homer's works, Zenodotus' twenty-two year term produced the compilation of a Homeric glossary, which also was the first alphabetized arrangement, and the formulation of complete critical editions of Homer's masterpieces the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. He also is responsible for the division of Homeric epics into twenty-four books and initiation of the marginal obellus, a dash, to mark what he considered spurious lines, eliminating some lines and altering others while combining lines of different verses into one. Zenodotus was thought a maverick by later workers in the library, given to conjectural editing and failing to distinguish between his own or everyday use of words and those distinctively Homer's, resulting in editions more the editor's than Homer's. He paid close attention to Homer's style but neglected to develop a critical method for analyzing it. Still, the foundation of his scholarly work was the comparison of several manuscripts, an essential component of literary research. Zenodotus' recension of Homeric texts ranks as the earliest editorial revision of a literary work based on critical examination of the text and the use of

sources. As the first editor of any text, Alexandria's first librarian can be called the founder of textual criticism.

The third head of the Library of Alexandria, Aristophanes, was appointed by Ptolemy V and served circa. 205-185. Aristophanes had a well deserved reputation as a notable literary scholar. A pupil of Zenodotus, Aristophanes is credited with initiating markings that furthered the rise of grammar and textual criticism as academic pursuits. Identified with Aristophanes' exemplary editions of Homer is a system of accentuation and punctuation marks devised mainly to preserve proper pronunciation; among his innovations are elision markers; syllabic junctures; the hyphen, comma, colon, and period; short and long vowel signs; and accents, or diacritics, used to indicate pitch level and stress. Also originating with him are several symbols pertinent to textual criticism, such as the asterisk and the collective obelisk, which marked consecutive lines thought spurious. He was confident in his independent recensions, which were based on manuscript evidence, but his adherence to Alexandrian cultural standards sometimes prevented his full understanding of Homer's world and thus the epic poet's diction and plain style. Working with poets as well as dramatists, Aristophanes' scholarship encompassed Pindar, resulting in the first edition of the lyrical poet's collected odes. Notably, he separated the works into books complete with subdivisions by theme and recognition of metrical schemes. He also ventured into lexicography, compiling the first list of words that included etymologies, and he composed a description of grammatical regularity in Greek declension. Aristophanes might best be remembered, however, for his list of poets categorized by form (lyric, epic, etc.), which initiated the idea of a literary canon.

Aristarchus, the next head of the library, was a pupil of Aristophanes and appointed by Ptolemy VI. While administering the library in circa. 175-145, Aristarchus elevated Homeric literary scholarship to a legitimate body of knowledge and helped make his era renowned in the study of language and literature. Among his list of far-reaching accomplishments was the running commentary, which ranked second only to his expert critical treatises. A command of vocabulary informed his use of homonyms and synonyms to explain connections between words in literary works. Aristarchus was an authoritative Homeric critic and interpreter. His examination of the poet's language, trust in the poet's usage, and commentary on the poet's themes outstanding. He firmly believed that the author was his own best interpreter, thereby instituting the idea of authorial intent. He furthered the analogical method, adding to his teacher's rules of inflexion and declension, while initiating marginal symbols that pointed to conspicuous words or content, to disruption of the order of lines and its correction, and to

interpretations that differed specifically from Zenodotus'. He, furthermore, recognized eight parts of speech: noun, verb, participle, pronoun, article, adverb, preposition, and conjunction.

Aristarchus' name was equivalent to "famous critic," and his authority as a textual scholar justified his acclaim, but Alexandria's fifth librarian might best be remembered for the work of one of his students, Dionysius Thrax. Although he was not a librarian, Thrax authored the first surviving Greek grammar. His fifteen-page *Téchnē grammatiké* opens with a description of Alexandrian grammar that places in context the principles underlying the work of the librarian literary scholars. Grammar, according to Thrax, consists of six parts: precise oral recitation adhering to prosody; clarification of literary words and phrases; preparation of commentary on expressions and content; ascertaining etymology; determining regularities; and high regard for literature. The *Téchnē* turned out to be the pinnacle of literary scholarship in Alexandria, justifying the purpose of textual studies and the role of the grammarian, while securing the lasting triumph of the pioneering librarians. Practically every grammar book today can be traced to Thrax.

Like so many of the lasting contributions of ancient Greeks to the Western intellectual tradition, the achievement of the librarian literary scholars in Hellenistic Alexandria deserves distinction. Their highly considered work earns the esteem and gratitude of anyone who appreciates the art of literary editing, and it should inspire academic librarians to aim for excellence in their own scholarly endeavors.

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