TWO BOOKS ON TRADITION

Holger Gzella, *Aramäisch. Weltsprache des Altertums*
Historische Bibliothek der Gerda Henkel Stiftung. Munich:
C. H. Beck 2023, 480 pages with 30 b/w ill. and 5 maps, ISBN
978-3-406-79348-6 (Hardcover).

Irene Vallejo, *Papyrus. The Invention of Books in the Ancient World*
Translated from Spanish by Charlotte Whittle.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2022, 464 pages,
ISBN 978-0-593-31889-8 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by
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Where do we stand in relation to tradition? The question is both epistemological (how do we know the past?) and political (which past is ours, with whom do we share it?). It maintains its interest today, just as the answers retain their ambivalence, refusing neatly ideological resolution. On the one hand, we are fully aware that tradition can consolidate and buttress arbitrary monopolies on power and money. On the other hand, tradition has historically proven resilient to state censorship and disinformation campaigns and is thus uniquely capable of transmitting humane values.

Irene Vallejo's *Papyrus* and Holger Gzella's *Aramäisch* present two very different approaches to the question, addressed to two very different publics. Vallejo writes in a personal voice and wears her politics on her sleeve, while dutifully reproducing the classics in their eighteenth-century *Urform*, a story about the Greek origins of Europe. *Papyrus* has become (as the dust jacket puts it) "#1 International Best Seller", and was named a Financial Times Best Book of

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2022. It is tradition for the ladies and gentlemen sitting in business class. Gzella, by contrast, writes in the impersonal third-person of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, and avoids political commentary, all the while relentlessly exposing a key blind spot of the classics and presenting an alternative understanding of tradition itself. Aimed at nonspecialists, *Aramäisch* will likely reach a smattering of professors sitting in economy.

Vallejo holds a PhD in classical philology and has since built a career in feuilleton. *El infinito en un junco*, her history of Greek and Latin literature and impassioned plea for their preservation, was published in 2019, and has since appeared in some thirty-one translations.[1] Charlotte White's English rendition nicely conveys its chatty charm.

Papyrus is in many ways up to date with the discipline of classics. Thus reception history is central, with emphasis on modern European literature and film. Film is also a frequent source of analogy ("The scene, recounted by Plutarch, seems to pave the way for Robert De Niro's 'You talkin' to me?' scene in *Taxi Driver*", p. 185). Analogizing extends to artifacts: "ancient wax tablets were as likely to betray an affair as cell phones today" (p. 268). Vallejo is especially good on book history and its intersections with media studies, supplying enjoyable excurses on alphabets, writing supports, formats, libraries, bookstores, and habits of reading.

The elucidation of social contexts is part of the popular appeal, and it bears fruit especially in Vallejo's discussion of gender; for example, when she excavates "a current of female rebellion" under the surface of Periclean Athens (p. 151). She also offers passages of pure memoir, including raw tales of schoolyard bullying, which lend her voice a disarming vulnerability. Her historical interpretations are similarly psychologizing, as when "The idea of a mixed-race empire was galloping through Alexander's mind" (p. 14).

Vallejo's creative engagements with newer scholarship make her unreflective Eurocentrism all the more striking. Greek and Roman history are the origins of Europe, and Europe the sole heir to Greek and Latin literature. Thus Greek literature is "primitive European literature" (p. 157), and Hellenistic schools (whether in Africa, and Asia, or Europe) are "the root of European pedagogy" (p. 179). In brief, "Greece persists as the first mile of European culture" (p. 242). So too, if less frequently and more ambivalently, for Rome; as when censorship of Ovid constitutes "the beginning of moralizing in Europe" (p. 332).

Vallejo's Greek miracle begins in Athens ("the most important city on the planet", p. 176), and it produces an unimpeachably liberal politics. "Like its Roman counterpart, Hellenic civilization was essentially individualist and liberal. In those days there were plenty of Bill Gateses" (p. 180). This capacious concept of Greek freedom even survives Alexander, whose empire was "a new political form

1
They are listed in the Spanish Wikipedia entry for *El infinito en un junco* (February 22, 2024).

with the potential to bring peace, culture, and laws to all human beings" (p. 230).

Near Eastern cultures are by contrast sterile, and cannot establish a tradition: "While the texts and even the languages of the earliest civilizations that invented writing in the Fertile Crescent – Mesopotamia and Egypt – were forgotten as the centuries passed, and, in the best-case scenarios, were deciphered long centuries later, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* have never been without readers" (p. 348).

This claim only holds if you disregard Hebrew and Aramaic literatures. On the other end of antiquity, Vallejo is oblivious to medieval afterlives for Greek literature on the borders of or beyond Europe, be they Byzantine or Islamic. Muslims appear as the destroyers of the Library of Alexandria (even as Vallejo dutifully flags the story as dubious), but we never hear about the Abbasid translation movement. Vallejo proudly claims Iberian authors like Martial and Quintilian (the latter was born "just 120 kilometers from where I am writing", p. 342), but has nothing to say about intellectual life al-Andalus. In short, she is invested in a very old story in which Europe begins in, and retains sole claim to, Greece.

Holger Gzella's *Aramäisch* is essentially a refutation of that old story. It is published in the *Historische Bibliothek der Gerda Henkel Stifting*, which is explicitly aimed at "einer interessierten Öffentlichkeit". However, Gzella, who is Professor Ordinarius for Old Testament Theology at LMU Munich, makes few concessions to the brief. If Vallejo's movie references signal her target audience, so too do Gzella's frequent allusions to German literary history and academic culture. We are warned against anachronistic praise of Achaemenid religious tolerance, "als ob Lessing auf dem königlichen Nachttisch gelegen hätte" (p. 161). The East Syrian Patriarch Timotheos I "[wäre heute ...] vermutlich Akademiepräsident" (p. 359), owing to his syntactically complex and diplomatic prose.

All this erudition serves, not to prop up an old story, but to forge a new one. Aramaic emerges in the *Kleinstaaterei* of the early iron age, ca. 1000 BC. It becomes a preferred medium of chancery scribes, supporting a common thread of administrative culture even as the neo-Assyrian and neo-Babylonian empires rise and fall. Aramaic literature, from an early age, expresses the worldview of clever, loyal, and experienced bureaucrats; its prototypical sage is the royal chancellor Ahiqar. The language receives standard form under the Achaemenids ("Reichsaramäisch"), and its scribes begin to assert religious authority, even deploying it to critique the rulers whom they serve. The half-Hebrew, half-Aramaic Book of Daniel, a historical novel of neo-Babylonian times composed under the Hellenistic Seleucids, is a key text, as when the scribal hero's decipherment of the Aramaic writing on the wall demonstrates his privileged access to divine knowledge.

Imperial Aramaic forms the shared substrate for new regional languages in the Roman period, even as religious literatures break free of the state bureaucracies. Aramaic becomes a second holy language for Jews from Jerusalem to Baghdad, the medium of rab-

binic lore in the Talmud and the retold scripture of the Targumim. Classical Syriac, born in Edessa, becomes the liturgical and literary language of Christians from western into central and southern Asia.

Arabic grows up alongside Aramaic in urban centers such as Petra and Tayma, such that the Qur'an is filled, not only with borrowed Aramaic words, but also with the scribal ethos of the Aramaic tradition. Contrast here Vallejo, who writes that "the Koran would describe Christians as 'Peoples of the Book' with a mixture of respect and astonishment" (p. 306). Gzella's account makes clear that *ahl al-kitāb* does not express Muslim awe at Christian book culture; rather, it signals Muslim access to and identification with a millennium-old tradition of Hebrew and Aramaic letters.

Gzella repeatedly rejects the cliche of the interrupted traditions of the ancient Near East (see the strong formulations at pp. 221 and 248). He furthermore shows how the Aramaic tradition can help us to rethink the idea of tradition in general. He insists that "Aramaic" does not name a people; it is rather "Sprache ohne eigenes Sprechervolk" (p. 34). It is not the bearer of a single culture, but a "Medium hybrider Selbstverständnisse" (p. 99) across many cultures and religions and over three thousand years. It nevertheless constitutes a coherent tradition, with special insight into the precarity attending officials "in den Vorzimmern der Macht" (p. 135). Aramaic literature is above all wisdom literature; its protagonists, from Ahiqar to Daniel, remain exemplary today.

What kind of tradition is this? From a distance, it resembles Leo Strauss's history of philosophy, that thin thread of skepticism covertly sustained from one hostile regime to the next, but the dynamics are quite different. Whereas Strauss's Maimonides and al-Farabi were forced by religious orthodoxy to conceal their atheism, Gzella's scribes invent religious orthodoxy as a check on imperial power. And unlike the hidden wisdom of Strauss's philosophers, the scribes' wisdom was written plainly and taught in school, where the story and sayings of Ahiqar were set as standard texts.

In short, Gzella shows how the traditional methods of philology (which he calls, quoting Shackleton Bailey, "looking things up", p. 44) can build new stories, not only about individual traditions, but about tradition itself. This is worthy of consideration by art historians, just as Gzella's reformulation of *Weltsprache* can help us to rethink how we write global art history. Global reach, if understood in military terms (Alexander conquered the world) or economic (international box office), is not the only, nor even the primary, criterion of notability. Of greater interest is the persistence of specific images that maintain their power as "media of hybrid self-understanding" (we might say "dialectical images") over long periods of time. The careful practice of art history ("looking at things"), combined with a critical attitude to claims of discontinuity, is well suited to reveal the wisdom of the image.