

Encyclopaedism from Antiquity to the Renaissance. Jason König and Greg Woolf, eds.

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This work, impressive in its scope and the depth and breadth of the scholarship that it reflects, arose from a British Academy-funded conference in St. Andrews in 2007. Its twenty-four chapters are divided into three primary parts: “Classical Encyclopaedism,”

“Medieval Encyclopaedism,” and “Renaissance Encyclopaedism.” A fourth part, “Chinese Encyclopaedism: A Postscript,” contains a single, ambitious twenty-five-page article by Harriet T. Zurndorfer (“The Passion to Collect, Select, and Protect: Fifteen Hundred Years of the Chinese Encyclopaedia”). This has been included “to raise questions about how far the model of an encyclopaedic spectrum might be meaningfully extended” (6). Each section is introduced by a summary chapter. The book offers an integrated fifty-nine-page bibliography of sources cited by the authors, clearly a solid foundation for the complicated edifice the bibliography supports. The book also has a not particularly detailed index.

What makes the book of particular interest is the enormous variety of works that are able to be included for discussion. This is the result of the editors’ emphasis on the conceptual fluidity, the range of meanings, and the cultural and historical situatedness of approaches to encyclopedism, and their commitment to a broad notion of “an encyclopaedic spectrum.” The chapters provide glimpses of a more than 2,000-year-long history of encyclopedism and of the problems it has always had to deal with in the context of the times and of accuracy, currency, comprehensiveness, underlying motivations or purpose, objectivity, intended audience, and so on. The advent of Wikipedia, Google, and various online projects (one thinks of the encyclopedic implications of the concept “portal”) continue to throw such issues into high relief.

In Rome, Alexandria, Byzantium, Seville, and elsewhere in the ancient and medieval world, encyclopedism appeared as a natural response to a “bookworld” (29ff.) of increasingly numerous, scattered texts and the resulting fragmentation of the knowledge that they recorded. Compilers required, then as now, access to the collections of great public and private libraries. They had to develop systematic techniques for knowledge collection and ordering. Necessarily influenced by the literary, religious, sociopolitical, and epistemological contexts within which they worked, each was faced with the resolution of the fundamental tensions arising from what Daniel Andersson calls the encyclopedist’s “twin drives of expansion and compaction” (408).

While it is impossible to comment on all or many of the chapters in this book, every page has something of interest — a work, an author, an arresting fact or observation, or a surprising inclusion and approach such as, for example, Daniel Harris-McCoy’s chapter on Artemidorus’s *Oneirocritica*, “a treatise on dream divination and a catalogue of dream interpretations.” Several chapters include discussions of Pliny’s *Natural History*, which has an important place in the history of encyclopedism (chapter 2, König and Woolf’s “Encyclopaedism in the Roman Empire”; chapter 4, Mary Beagon’s “*Labores pro bono publico*”; and chapter 9, Marco Formisano’s “Late Latin Encyclopaedism”). The discussions of Diodorus of Sicily’s “forty-book history of the world from its mythical beginnings to the time of composition” (51) and Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* (Elizabeth Keen, chapter 13) reveal something of the historical complexity of issues of encyclopedic commitment and comprehensiveness. András Németh discusses in great detail the tenth-century *Historical Excerpts* of Byzantine emperor Constantine VII. This was a vast historiographical project, only part of which survives, that represented an

exercise of imperial power in how history and presumably the emperor's place in it were to be represented. In mid-fifteenth-century England, Reginald Pecock compiled a series of "interrelated treatises" that attempted to "systematise and teach the entire Christian religion in the vernacular to all levels of educational attainment" (Ian Johnson, "Loose Giblets"). The authorities eventually accused him of "theological unsoundness," burnt his book, and sequestered him without access to a library or to writing materials until his "miserable end" (341).

William Dugdale's *History of Imbanking and Drayning of Divers Fens and Marshes* (1662), though encyclopedic in nature and by an antiquarian of impeccable reputation for scholarship, had an ulterior motive in which it seems clear that Dugdale was knowingly complicit. The work was commissioned to buttress the fortunes of a group of "London-based adventurers." They sought justification for what seemed to have been a certain amount of skulduggery in fen-drainage projects they had sponsored but that had ruined livelihoods and dispossessed inhabitants of the fens of their lands. The chapter is engagingly entitled "The Big Dig." Ann Blair's chapter, "Revisiting Renaissance Encyclopaedism," is perhaps one of the most generally illuminating of the book. It provides a perspective on many of the earlier encyclopedic endeavors as she examines "what was new about Renaissance encyclopaedism and what motivated these innovations" (379). Her carefully argued answer turns the reader from the medieval and early Renaissance past to the gradual emergence of modern encyclopedism and the encyclopedias it produced.

This is an important collection of essays that will be useful to scholars from a variety of disciplines, not least to those who are attempting to shape and people a new subdiscipline sometimes called information history.

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