

Michael J. Kruger: *Miniature Codices in Early Christianity*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 2025 (Oxford Early Christian Studies). XII, 240 p., 9 ill. £ 84.00/\$ 110.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-894039-5.

This is a modest book about the form and functions of tiny manuscripts made for Christian use between the second and eighth centuries. It braids two strands of historical inquiry that have occupied scholars of early Christianity for several decades: the history of literacy and reading habits in ancient Christian communities; and the history of the materiality of the book (or codex) and its relationship to the scroll (or roll). Michael J. Kruger's monograph offers a case study of a very specific subset of early Christian manuscripts: the miniature codex, that is, a 'hand-sized' book made of papyrus or parchment that was small enough to carry discreetly or to wear around one's neck. Over the course of four chapters, Kruger lays out the rationale for his study, defines the parameters of miniature codices in terms of their size and content, makes inferences about their practical uses, and addresses their emblematic functions. The final two chapters of the book provide a two-part catalogue of surviving fragments of these tiny books, divided between those containing New Testament texts and those containing non-canonical or liturgical-ritual materials.

Chapter 1 ("Compressed in Tiny Skins: Introduction to the Miniature Codex," pp. 1–28) provides the rationale for the book and its place in the historiographical tradition as the first monograph devoted to the study of miniature codices. It surveys scholarly opinion regarding the early Christian preference for codices over rolls, siding with the "canonical argument" that Christians valued multiple texts over a single text and "not only would they have desired to have these books (or at least some of them) in a single volume, but that single volume would need to allow them to easily flip from book to book" (p. 17). It then summarizes previous scholarship on miniature codices, which have generally appeared in broader studies of early Christian manuscripts and reading communities, most notably Eric G. Turner's "The Typology of the Early Codex" and Harry Y. Gamble's "Books and Readers in the Early Church".<sup>1</sup> Kruger's principles of exclusion for the subjects of

1 E. G. Turner: *The Typology of the Early Codex*. Philadelphia, PA 1977 (Haney Foundation Series 18); and H. Y. Gamble: *Books and Readers in the Early Church. A History of Early Christian Texts*. New Haven, CT/London 1995.

his study are quite strict. In the chapters that follow, he deals exclusively with miniature codices that have the following characteristics: (a) their content or provenance is Christian in some way, which includes works by heretical sects like the Manichaeans, but does not include Septuagint texts lacking markers of Christian use; (b) they are written in Greek (to the exclusion of the large corpus of Coptic miniature codices as well as those attested in Latin); (c) their medium is parchment or papyrus; and (d) they are “early,” a surprisingly vague term that Kruger defines more precisely as follows: “any miniature codex written in majuscule script as opposed to the later minuscule script (introduced around the ninth century)” (p. 28).

Chapter 2 (“One-Hand Books: Characteristics of Miniature Codices,” pp. 29–50) offers a description of the primary characteristics of the tiny books catalogued in this study. Kruger defines them primarily in terms of their form and function. Miniature codices have two formal features: their size and their codex book format. While earlier discussions of miniature codices among papyrologists have established their maximum reconstructed size as no greater than 10 cm in width, Kruger’s study broadens this parameter slightly by including for consideration codices up to 12 cm in width. All such restrictions are arbitrary, however, as Kruger acknowledges. Even his generous allowance leads to the omission of several slightly larger codices of considerable interest (pp. 30–32). Two features of these tiny books highlight their function as texts designed primarily to be read. First, their scribes write out a continuous text in contrast to parchment scraps with writing employed as protective amulets, the texts of which are usually emblematic and non-continuous. Second, miniature codices are distinguished by the quality of their scribal hands, which tend to be practiced and even semi-professional, again in contrast to amulets, which are often informal and unskilled. Even so, the overlap between miniature codices and amulets is not always clear, so Kruger devotes considerable space in this chapter to chart the spectrum of differences between these genres of ancient texts.

Chapter 3 (“He Carried the Books of Sacred Scripture: Practical Functions of Miniature Codices,” pp. 51–75) reconstructs how the owners of miniature codices may have used them. These books were made for private reading. While there is considerable evidence for the public reading of Christian books in ancient churches, testimony of private reading is much scarcer, though Origen, John Chrysostom, and Caesarius of Arles each encouraged their congregations to read the scriptures at home. This constituency of pri-

vate readers must have been very small, however, as only a small percentage of late antique Christians would have been both literate and wealthy enough to purchase books for personal reading. While many miniature codices preserve canonical texts, like the Gospels and the letters of Paul, the frequency of apocryphal literature that survives in this medium suggests that early Christian readers were interested in consuming stories that they would not have heard in church. Kruger suggests, however, that the presence of prayers, hymns, and creeds in some of these tiny books means that we cannot rule out their use in a ritual setting. It is also noteworthy that the small size of these codices made them convenient to carry while travelling.

Chapter 4 (“The Devil Will Not Approach: Iconic Functions of Miniature Codices,” pp. 76–105) adopts terminology coined in a recent article by Jeremiah Coogan to talk about the emblematic function of miniature codices.<sup>2</sup> After rehearsing James W. Watts’s argument that the tiny size of these books privatizes, personalizes, and (counterintuitively) magnifies their importance for their owners, Kruger proceeds with his application of Coogan’s categories of analysis.<sup>3</sup> First, he argues that these books were symbols of Christian identity. The wearing of tiny codices around the neck, attested not only among men but also among women and children, displayed these objects to on-lookers as religious identity-markers. This may be true in the most superficial way, but this argument does not consider any of the recent discussion of the complexity and fluidity of Christian identity in this period.<sup>4</sup> Second, the presence of these small books signaled the spiritual presence of Christ, especially if they contained the text of the Gospels. This argument is made by analogy with the similar treatment of regular-sized Christian books in other contexts. Third, miniature codices embodied a divine power that had the strength to protect their owners from the Devil, disease, and danger. Here again the line blurs between these small books and amulets, which served similar prophylactic functions. Even so, Church fathers like Chrysostom and Augustine seem to have condoned the use of miniature codices in this way so long as their contents were scriptural.

2 J. Coogan: *Divine Truth, Presence, and Power: The Christian Book in Fourth-Century Roman North Africa*. In: *Journal of Late Antiquity* 11, 2018, pp. 375–395.

3 J. W. Watts: *Ritualizing the Size of Books*. In: *Postscripts* 9, 2013, pp. 104–113.

4 É. Rebillard: *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE*. Ithaca, NY/London 2012 is conspicuously absent, for example.

The final two chapters provide a two-part inventory of the sixty-two tiny Greek codices of Christian provenance considered in this book. Chapter 5 (“Catalog of Greek Christian Miniature Codices: New Testament Texts,” pp. 106–137) offers descriptions of twenty-seven fragments that contain New Testament content. Each entry comprises the manuscript call number, its contents, its dimensions, its date and material (papyrus or parchment), its catalogue number in important instruments of reference, a paragraph-length description, and a short bibliography. Images of the fragments accompany a few of these entries. Kruger has organized these items not by date but rather by their place in the canon, which means that the inventory in this chapter has a different organizing principle than the inventory in the next chapter, which has been organized by date. Aside from this difference, Chapter 6 (“Catalog of Greek Christian Miniature Codices: Non-Canonical and Liturgical-Ritual Texts,” pp. 138–169) follows the same format as Chapter 5 and comprises descriptions of thirty-five fragments. Eighteen of these are apocryphal gospels, acts, and apocalypses, as well as texts like the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Didache*. The remaining seventeen are hymns and prayers.

The book’s conclusion (“Conclusion: Observations, Implications, and Pathways for Further Research,” pp. 170–183) offers some quantitative summaries of information about this modest manuscript genre. Perhaps the most important is the fact that more than half of the surviving corpus of miniature codices date from the fourth and fifth centuries. Unfortunately, Kruger offers no insights about the changes in reading or devotional habits that caused this kind of book to fall out of fashion by the ninth century. Nevertheless, “Miniature Codices in Early Christianity” makes the suggestive case that private devotion expressed through personal reading was a significant aspect of early Christian textual culture, perhaps even as early as the late second century. By keeping his parameters very narrow, however, Kruger has produced a short study that hints at a wider world of miniature codices containing works in Coptic and Latin, as well as selections from the Septuagint. Those topics await further study. Even though it is frequently repetitive and at times derivative of related scholarship, this monograph nonetheless offers a useful state-of-the-question summary of scholarship on miniature codices and an up-to-date catalogue of known manuscripts.

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