

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09186-3 - Collecting Early Christian Letters: From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity

Edited by Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

PART I

*Introducing early Christian letters*

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09186-3 - Collecting Early Christian Letters: From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity

Edited by Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09186-3 - Collecting Early Christian Letters: From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity

Edited by Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## CHAPTER I

*Continuities and changes in the practice of letter-collecting from Cicero to late antiquity**Bronwen Neil*

Letter-collections in classical and late antiquity give witness to the flourishing of letter-writing, from the formulaic exchanges between the elites of the Graeco-Roman empire to more wide-ranging correspondence by Roman, Gallic and eastern bishops and the monks of Egypt. While in classical antiquity only the elites could afford to write and send letters, due to the expense of the materials and limited access to postal services, in late antiquity the letter and the letter-collection became democratised, and their purpose broadened far beyond the original scope of Graeco-Roman letters. This volume is the first multi-authored study of classical, New Testament and late-antique letter-collections, crossing the traditional divide between these disciplines by focusing on Latin and Greek epistolary sources. Its authors attend to various aspects of the mechanics of making and transmitting letter-collections, whether in the ancient author's lifetime or in the following centuries.

Any attempt to identify the rationale behind most compilations of letters from classical and Christian antiquity is difficult, not least because poor survival rates make pronouncements on letter-collections hazardous.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, through careful study of compilation techniques and distribution strategies, we may assess and compare the epistolary outputs of classical and early Christian writers, both individually and collectively.

Epistolary theory has been the focus of much excellent scholarship in recent decades, especially in the fields of classical and New Testament studies.<sup>2</sup> Until recently, however, scholarship on letter-collections mostly focused on individual authors and their collections,<sup>3</sup> and did not seek to emphasise

<sup>1</sup> On some of the hazards assailing late-antique letter-writing and distribution, see Allen 2013a, and Allen in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Stowers 1986; White 1986; Aune 1987: 158–82; White 1988: 85–105, with annotated bibliography; Malherbe 1988; Klauck, 2006; Morello and Morrison 2007.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Paulinus of Nola: Mratschek 2002; Synesius of Cyrene: Roques 1989; Augustine of Hippo: Morgenstern 1993; Allen 2006a, 2006b; Jerome: Cain 2009; Leo I, bishop of Rome: Pietrini 2002, Neil 2009; Sidonius Apollinaris: Harries 1994, van Waarden 2010; Theodoret of Cyrillus: Wagner 1948, Schor 2011; Severus of Antioch: Allen and Hayward 2004.

the ways in which late-antique letter-collections were similar to or distinct from Graeco-Roman epistolography.

The shift in focus on letter-collections as a literary unit in their own right is signalled by Roy Gibson's groundbreaking 2012 article, in which he argued that there was considerable continuity of purpose other than biographical or historical narration in the rationales of those who collated non-fictional classical and late-antique letters.<sup>4</sup> A new volume of studies of the collections of some thirty letter-writers, both pagan and Christian, of the fourth and fifth centuries, is now in preparation.<sup>5</sup> The current volume focuses on the trajectory of letter-writing, and the act of collecting it, over the course of 700 years, from classical Graeco-Roman epistolography to the sixth century. In this introductory chapter, I will assess Gibson's claims for continuity by looking at classical Latin letter-collections, New Testament letters, and late-antique letter-collections. My aim is to provide a methodological framework for the individual studies of New Testament and late-antique letter-collections that follow, addressing questions of collation practices, survival rates, intended audience and usage of letters generally in letter-collections of classical and late antiquity.

### Classical letter-collections

Classical antiquity produced few letter-collections of any size that have survived, when compared with late antiquity, the western Middle Ages and the Byzantine era.<sup>6</sup> Those collections from ancient Greece and Rome that have survived have passed through numerous redactions in the process of their selection and reproduction. Surviving fictional letter-collections include the corpus of Greek letters of Chion of Heraclea, Themistocles and Euripides, as well as lesser-known authors such as the Greek sophist Philostratus (*c.* 170–*c.* 250), the author of a collection of love letters directed toward anonymous addressees, both male and female. One might also include the epistolary poems from exile (*Epistolae ex Ponto*) by the exiled Roman poet Ovid, and his fictive love letters, the *Heroides*, also written in poetic metre. Collections from authors of the early Christian era who self-consciously adopted classical, pagan models, such as the emperor Julian (361–63), the Roman senator Symmachus (370–84) and

<sup>4</sup> Gibson 2012. <sup>5</sup> Watts *et al.* forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> Constable 1976 remains the only systematic treatment of mediaeval epistolary sources across the whole of western Europe. Studies of epistolographic production in northern Italy from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries are collected in Gioanni and Cammarosano 2013. Mullett 1997 provides a good model of a treatment of a collection from a single author of the middle Byzantine period.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09186-3 - Collecting Early Christian Letters: From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity

Edited by Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Letter-collecting from Cicero to late antiquity*

5

the orator Libanius, will be considered in the forthcoming volume of Watts *et al.*, and thus have not been dealt with here.

The surviving evidence of non-fictional letter-collections from the first century BCE to the second century is amazingly sparse. Only four such collections survive from this period, and all are in Latin: those of Cicero (106–43 BCE), Seneca (c. 1–65), Pliny the Younger (c. 61–112) and Fronto (c. 95–166). In keeping with Graeco-Roman epistolographical practice, all of these authors hail from the intellectual elite, and write only to elite friends or acquaintances. In keeping with the lasting literary importance of these four authors, we will consider them individually, giving a brief summary of recent scholarship on the rationales behind their collections.

Cicero penned several collections divided, after his death, according to addressee: those addressed to his close friend Atticus (*Ad Atticum*); to his brother Quintus (*Ad Quintum*, three books), to his friend Brutus (*Ad Brutum*, two books), and the major collection of letters addressed to a range of friends and acquaintances, including P. Lentulus, C. Curio and the consul A. Claudius Pulcher (*Ad familiares*, sixteen books).<sup>7</sup> The sixteen books of letters *Ad Atticum* did not enter circulation until the time of Nero.<sup>8</sup> While modern editors from the seventeenth century have endeavoured to place these in chronological order, this was not a concern of Cicero's. Rather he grouped them first by addressee and then by theme.

Seneca seems to have collected and distributed his letters in a number of discrete books for distribution within his lifetime. Twenty books survive, comprising 124 letters. The subject matter of all of Seneca's *Epistulae morales* is his friend Lucilius' progress in the philosophical life, specifically in the Stoic life. The fact that his corpus remains the best evidence of Stoic philosophy makes it of particular interest in this context because of the affinities between early Christianity and Stoicism.<sup>9</sup> As Mark Davies and others have argued, Seneca was concerned to paint a picture of himself in his letters to Lucilius as a moral example and mentor, and to this end may have invented his purported correspondent.<sup>10</sup> Certainly Lucilius does not exist in any other literary sources. In this letter-corpus, written for posterity and intended for publication, Seneca may have been making a deliberate attempt to rival Cicero's epistolary output. Indeed, he points out on several occasions that his subject matter is more serious than that of Cicero's letters. Three of Seneca's letters illustrate the *consolatio* genre (*Epp.*

<sup>7</sup> On Cicero's letters and their arrangement in ancient sources and modern editions, see White 2010; Beard 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Gibson 2012: 57 and n. 5.   <sup>9</sup> See Ross 1974: 124.

<sup>10</sup> Davies forthcoming; with secondary literature.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09186-3 - Collecting Early Christian Letters: From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity

Edited by Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

63, 93 and 99), to which we return in the next section on New Testament letters.

Pliny the Younger carefully crafted his letter-collection in a way that displayed his skills as a politician, husband, lawyer and rhetor. Like Seneca, he also used his forebears as models, namely Cicero and Seneca himself.<sup>11</sup> In a recent doctoral thesis, Michelle Borg shows how Pliny was concerned to align himself with the newly ascended house of Trajan, leading him to elide details of his previous support for the Flavian dynasty.<sup>12</sup> Pliny's works have recently been made the subject of a number of studies, of which we must single out Roy Gibson and Ruth Morello's excellent introduction to the letters.<sup>13</sup> With the possible exception of Book 10, his correspondence with the emperor Trajan,<sup>14</sup> Pliny's correspondence was – like that of Seneca – meant to be circulated in his own lifetime. Several late-antique collections mirror the structure of nine books of private correspondence and one book of public or business correspondence, including those of the Roman senator Symmachus, author of some 900 letters; Ambrose of Milan, whose epistolary oeuvre is the subject of Wolf Liebeschuetz's chapter in this volume, and the Gallic bishop of Clermont, Sidonius Apollinaris.<sup>15</sup>

Marcus Cornelius Fronto's collection survives in a single palimpsest manuscript, discovered in the Ambrosiana library by Angelo Mai and first edited by him in 1815,<sup>16</sup> and again in 1823 with the inclusion of several single folia found in the Vatican library, then by Samuel Naber in 1867,<sup>17</sup> and more recently by M. P. J. van den Hout.<sup>18</sup> Fronto's numerous correspondents included the emperors Marcus Aurelius, Antoninus Pius and Lucius Verus, other members of the imperial household and various friends, all members of the senatorial class. In a letter to his friends, Fronto famously complained that he hated writing letters (*Ad amicos* 1.19). The problem was that Aulus Gellius was hounding him for copies of his works for publication. Recent literary scholars have moved away from the theory that Fronto collected and distributed the books of his correspondence himself, toward a more nuanced view that the books could have been published after the author's death by his friends and correspondents.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Gibson and Morello 2012: 74–103. <sup>12</sup> See Borg forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup> Gibson and Morello 2012. <sup>14</sup> Gibson 2012: 59.

<sup>15</sup> On Sidonius' letter-collection, preserved in some ninety codices, see van Waarden 2010: 30–55; Gibson 2013b.

<sup>16</sup> Mai 1815; 1823. See discussion in Gibson 2013a: 408–9; and Reynolds 1983: 173–4.

<sup>17</sup> Naber 1867.

<sup>18</sup> van den Hout 1988.

<sup>19</sup> Gibson 2012: 60, citing Champlin 1974. More recently see van den Hout 1999.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09186-3 - Collecting Early Christian Letters: From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity

Edited by Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Letter-collecting from Cicero to late antiquity*

7

Roy Gibson notes that classical, non-fictional Latin and Greek letters were not arranged chronologically by their ancient collectors, although modern editors have seen this as a shortcoming and sought to rectify it.<sup>20</sup> Instead they were divided up according to theme and/or addressee. Seneca's letters were all undated, and addressed to a single addressee. Fronto's letters were also not arranged in any chronological order. Gibson has plausibly argued that editorial rearranging of letters in a strictly chronological order changes their genre from that of epistolography to history or biography or even autobiography in the case of collections organised by the author himself.<sup>21</sup>

In his 2012 article, Gibson considered the rationales behind eleven classical and late-antique collections, asserting at the outset: '[D]espite fundamental changes in belief (and preferred narrative patterns) between the first and fourth centuries AD, methods of arranging letter-collections display not only some consistency of practice, but even continuity.'<sup>22</sup> Was there also a substantial similarity in the *types* of letters, as Gibson suggests?<sup>23</sup> Certainly the four types he identifies are constants across his sample of Latin collections from Cicero to Jerome: namely, consolation, recommendation, praise and exhortation. However, it seems that several other types developed, which were new to episcopal letter-writers of late antiquity, and reflected the new uses to which letters were being put. These were: (1) polemical letters; (2) dogmatic letters; (3) pastoral letters; (4) disciplinary letters; (5) administrative letters; (6) letters of advice; (7) letters of admonition; (8) decrees; and (9) judgements.<sup>24</sup>

That is not to say that Christian bishops abandoned their classical training in rhetoric when they took up the mitre. The letters of Synesius of Cyrene, bishop of Ptolemais, are ample evidence against such a fatuous notion. Even Augustine, champion of plain speech that the faithful can understand in his homilies, and in *De doctrina Christiana*, returned to his oratorical training when writing to his peers and patrons of the aristocracy. Certainly, the late fifth-century bishop of Clermont, Sidonius Apollinaris, offers a striking example in the parallels he made between the structure of Pliny's collection in ten books, and that of his own nine books, some four centuries later.<sup>25</sup> One wonders, therefore, whether literary tropes

<sup>20</sup> Gibson 2012; Gibson 2013a: 407–8; a prime example is the editions of Cicero's letters by Shackleton Bailey 1977, 1980 and 1988.

<sup>21</sup> Gibson 2013a: 392. <sup>22</sup> Gibson 2012: 59. <sup>23</sup> Gibson 2012: 59.

<sup>24</sup> These nine types, together with the four mentioned by Gibson, were identified by Allen and Neil 2013: 16–17.

<sup>25</sup> Gibson 2013b.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09186-3 - Collecting Early Christian Letters: From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity

Edited by Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

were stronger than the ‘beliefs’ and ‘preferred narrative patterns’ to which Gibson referred in the quotation above. The rules of these tropes were strictly observed by Christian writers and redactors, down to the proper arrangement by theme and/or addressee. As Gibson observes, chronological organisation was not favoured at all (and not adopted in papal letter-collections until the innovation of the Scythian monk Dionysius Exiguus, in his early sixth-century collection of decretals and canons).<sup>26</sup> Nor was there any sense of historical or biographical narrative in Christian letter-collections, which would seem to privilege the identity of the author as an individual, rather than a servant of God. If one leaves aside ordering by addressee (of increasing irrelevance over the passage of time, and especially in letters of the bishops of Rome in their grand push for universal application of their decretals), what other principles of organisation remained to collators of late-antique letters?

By contrast to the non-fictional collections, the fictional collections of Chion of Heraclea, Themistocles and Euripides, written in Greek, were arranged chronologically. Gibson confesses himself unsure as to why this should be so.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the reason is a banal one: it is much easier to date letters that are invented, than it is in the case of non-fictional letters whose dates might be missing, wrong or falsified. Seneca’s letters to Lucilius perhaps fall between the two types: they bear no dates, and are possibly addressed to a fictitious correspondent.

### New Testament letters

Only a few New Testament letters can be confidently ascribed to a particular author. The six disputed or ‘deutero-Pauline’ letters, of uncertain authorship (2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians and the pastoral letters: Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy), also date to the first and second centuries. These canonical ‘forgeries’ have been studied in great detail, along with 1 and 2 Peter, and extra-canonical letters, such as Paul’s letters to and from his contemporary Seneca,<sup>28</sup> and Jesus’ purported correspondence with the Ethiopian king Abgar. This is a Syrian forgery documenting the conversion of the people of Edessa, along with their king Abgar IX (179–214), by the disciple Addai, purportedly one of the seventy-two sent out by Christ. Abgar made a reply in the form of a verbal message or, according

<sup>26</sup> On this very early collection of papal letters, see further Neil 2013a.

<sup>27</sup> Gibson 2012: 58 n. 9.   <sup>28</sup> Sevenster 1961.



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09186-3 - Collecting Early Christian Letters: From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity

Edited by Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Letter-collecting from Cicero to late antiquity*

9

to Eusebius (*HE* 1.13), a letter. Only a fifth-century Armenian version of the letter from ps-Abgar survives.<sup>29</sup>

Continuities of subgenres of letter found in ancient Greek and Latin letters, such as the *consolatio* or letter of consolation, have been noted by some scholars, including David Luckensmeyer and Bronwen Neil in their study of 1 Thessalonians, the apostle Paul's earliest letter. This letter, with its strong eschatological elements, should be read as a letter of consolation to the community to which it was addressed.<sup>30</sup> In the same way as three of Seneca's letters (*Epp.* 63, 93 and 99) offer consolation to his friend Lucilius (whether or not that friend was a fictional character),<sup>31</sup> so the first letter to the Thessalonians offers consolation to a community facing difficult challenges and signs of the end times. That Seneca's letter-corpus was intentionally structured for a wider audience is clear from *Ep.* 1.36–39 and *Ep.* 8.1–3.<sup>32</sup> Paul wrote his first letter to the community in Thessalonica in either 50 or 51, probably with the aid of Silvanus (i.e., Silas), and Timothy.<sup>33</sup> Malherbe described 1 Thessalonians as 'the first Christian pastoral letter',<sup>34</sup> a curious turn of phrase, since it could well be argued that pastoral letters, that is, letters of spiritual direction from a spiritual leader to a group or community, are indigenous to early Christianity. While the letter has also been called a 'friendship' letter, from the founders of the nascent church of Thessalonica to the community from whom they are unwillingly separated, this does not adequately account for its repeated references to afflictions and suffering.<sup>35</sup> Instead, the letter should be read as a classical consolation, from one absent friend to another, in the face of real adversity and possible death for their faith.<sup>36</sup> The reason that scholars have been reluctant to interpret 1 Thessalonians in this way lies in a basic misunderstanding of the nature of ancient epistolary and rhetorical handbooks. These handbooks, dating from the third century BCE to the sixth century CE, include two unrelated handbooks of ps-Demetrius,<sup>37</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ed. Alishan 1868. See discussion of all of these works in Ehrman 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Luckensmeyer and Neil, forthcoming.

<sup>31</sup> Cancik 1967; Maurach 1970; Russell 1974: 70–95; Klauck 2006: 170–1.

<sup>32</sup> Luckensmeyer and Neil, forthcoming, n. 13.

<sup>33</sup> For the literature on Paul's authorship see Luckensmeyer 2009: 51–3.

<sup>34</sup> Malherbe 2000: 211.

<sup>35</sup> Luckensmeyer and Neil, forthcoming, n. 16, reject the assertion to the contrary of Schoon-Janßen 2000: 189–90.

<sup>36</sup> That consolation was part of the hortatory purpose of 1 Thessalonians, see also Malherbe 2000: 81–6 and 279–80; Chapa 1994; and a brief statement by Donfried 1993: 5. See the discussion of these sources by Luckensmeyer and Neil forthcoming, nn. 28, 29 and 31.

<sup>37</sup> Ps-Demetrius, *περὶ ἑρμ.* or *De elocutione* 223–35, Roberts 1932, repr. in Malherbe 1988: 16, 18; ps-Demetrius, *τύποι ἐπιστολικοί*, Weichert 1910: 1–12; see the discussion of authorship at xvii–xviii.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09186-3 - Collecting Early Christian Letters: From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity

Edited by Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

Bronwen Neil

as well as those of ps-Libanius,<sup>38</sup> Aelius Theon,<sup>39</sup> Menander Rhetor<sup>40</sup> and Julius Victor.<sup>41</sup> These texts need to be read as descriptive rather than prescriptive: no single letter contains all the stock elements indicated by ps-Demetrius, ps-Libanius or other rhetorical handbooks.

By using three letters of Seneca (*Epp.* 63, 93 and 99) as a test case, Luckensmeyer and Neil showed that contemporaries of the antique world did not necessarily follow generic structures, but rather adapted those structures to suit their occasional purposes.<sup>42</sup> This caveat, against reading ancient epistolary handbooks prescriptively, is apposite in our consideration of how the genre of letter-writing changed with the advent of Christianity.

### Papal letters

Papal letter-collections are in a class of their own, largely because most have been preserved in canon law-collections made from the sixth century into the mediaeval period.<sup>43</sup> Thus they have a relatively narrow focus on dogmatic issues and matters of clerical discipline or territorial disputes. Gregory the Great's *Register* of 854 letters is an exception, being collected and distributed as a whole even before his death (604). The next largest papal letter-collections that have been preserved from late antiquity are those of Pope Leo I (440–61) and the lesser-known, yet sizeable, collections of Popes Innocent I (401–19), Gelasius I (492–6) and Pelagius I (556–61). Papal letters went by various names: a wide range of words could designate letter-types of a canonical status, for example *constitutum*, *epistula decretalis* or *epistula encyclica*.<sup>44</sup> Other, more general terms used by all bishops were *libellus*, which could be a document, communication or report; *relatio* (narration or recital of events); *suggestio* (points for consideration) and *commonitorium* (reminder, instruction). Synodical letters (*epistulae synodicae*) were those disseminated by an incoming bishop to demonstrate where he stood on matters of faith; synodal letters (*epistulae synodales*), on the other hand, communicated the decisions of synods. The

<sup>38</sup> Ps-Libanius (sometimes falsely attributed to Proclus in manuscripts), ἐπιστολιμαῖοι χαρακτήρες, Weichert 1910: 13–34, and discussion of authorship at xxv–xxix.

<sup>39</sup> Ael. Theon, *Progymnasmata*, 8. *Prosopopoeia*, Kennedy 2003: 47–9.

<sup>40</sup> Menander Rhetor, *Treatise* 2.9: *The Consolatory Speech*, Russell and Wilson 1981: 160–5; and Menander Rhetor, *Treatise* 2.11: *The Funeral Speech*, Russell and Wilson 1981: 171–9.

<sup>41</sup> Julius Victor, *Ars Rhetorica* 27 (*De epistolis*), Halm 1863: 447–8; Trapp 2003: 185–9.

<sup>42</sup> Luckensmeyer and Neil forthcoming, n. 44. On Christian consolation letters more generally, see Gregg 1975: 53–8.

<sup>43</sup> See Maassen 1870; more recently Moreau 2010: 487–506.

<sup>44</sup> See Moreau 2010: 489–92; Allen and Neil 2013: 17.