

**Violet Moller, *The Map of Knowledge: A Thousand-Year History of How Classical Ideas Were Lost and Found* (New York: Doubleday, 2019), 312 pp., ISBN 9780385541763 (hardcover)**

Peter F. McNally

Volume 59, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094204ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/pbsc.v59i1.37497>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Bibliographical Society of Canada/La Société bibliographique du Canada

ISSN

0067-6896 (imprimé)  
2562-8941 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

McNally, P. (2022). Compte rendu de [Violet Moller, *The Map of Knowledge: A Thousand-Year History of How Classical Ideas Were Lost and Found* (New York: Doubleday, 2019), 312 pp., ISBN 9780385541763 (hardcover)]. *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada / Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada*, 59, 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.33137/pbsc.v59i1.37497>

© Peter F. McNally, 2022



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

## REVIEWS

Violet Moller, *The Map of Knowledge: A Thousand-Year History of How Classical Ideas Were Lost and Found* (New York: Doubleday, 2019), 312 pp., ISBN 9780385541763 (hardcover)

Reviewed by PETER F. MCNALLY  
McGill University

Greek knowledge disappeared from Western Europe during the fifth-century decline and fall of the Roman Empire and reappeared during the later Middle Ages, in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. This story of disappearance and reappearance is recounted in introductory book history courses that speak briefly of texts being translated from Greek into Arabic, finding their way to Spain and Italy, and being further translated into Medieval Latin. More widely reported is that in the decades before and after the fall of Constantinople (1453) there was an outflowing of ancient Greek texts from Byzantium to Italy, where Venetian printers ensured their wide dissemination. These brief, exciting, and colourful brushstrokes are typically all that is offered in introductory courses.

Violet Moller, an independent British intellectual historian with a specific interest in knowledge transmission, wrote *The Map of Knowledge* after completing her PhD on early modern British libraries – including that of Dr. John Dee (1527–1608/9), many of whose books were by Arab scholars. Rather than focus upon the contents of these books, this study concentrates on people, places, and circumstances – “characters and stories” (xvi) – surrounding the survival and reintroduction to Western Europe of the most important books by three ancient Greek scientists: Euclid (ca. 325–265 BC), *The Elements* (mathematics); Ptolemy (ca. AD 100–170), *The Almagest* (astronomy);

and a training curriculum by Galen (ca. AD 129–200) sometimes known as *The Sixteen Books* (medicine).

Moller's story begins in AD 500, with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire under the force of Germanic and Asian tribal invasion, and the "Great Vanishing" of books, libraries, education, and Greek – the Empire's language of scholarship and learning. Thereafter, the story revolves around seven cities that served as centres of learning during the thousand years between Rome and the Renaissance: two in the Middle East – Alexandria and Baghdad – two in Spain – Cordoba and Toledo – and three in Italy – Salerno, Palermo, and Venice. Constantinople is deliberately excluded from the list. The final chapter – "1500 and Beyond" – concludes the volume.

As a prelude, Moller outlines the uncertain circumstance of the time for learning and texts. In the ancient world, only 144 mathematicians can be identified. Papyrus scrolls, the medium for transmitting Greek texts, were relatively fragile and required regular recopying. The upheavals of Rome's decline and fall resulted in just twenty percent of library holdings surviving, including a handful of copies of Euclid, Ptolemy, and Galen. Only by the twelfth century was Western Europe's recovery from outside invasion sufficiently strong that a sustained revival of learning was possible. Central to Moller's narrative are libraries harbouring fugitive texts.

The hero of Moller's story is Islamic culture – its scholars, who collected, preserved, and copied the scientific knowledge of ancient Greece, and added insights and learning; and its leaders, who supported the scholars and were themselves sometimes scholarly. Along with specifying individuals, each chapter outlines the political, social, religious, and economic circumstances that permitted or thwarted scholarly advancement. Among such advancements was introducing Europeans to Hindu-Arabic numerals. In medicine, major advances beyond Galen occurred. Also outlined are the tragic circumstances that resulted in the Umayyad dynasty of Syria relocating, in the eighth century, to Cordoba, Spain. The central role of neighbouring Toledo in translating ancient Greek texts from Arabic to Latin is well covered.

Equally heroic are translators and editors who spent their lives pursuing Arabic texts in Spain and Italy for translation into Latin. Although many were anonymous, others were colourful and included Adelard, Petrarch, Michael Scot, Gerard of Cremona, Leonard of Pisa, Gerbert d'Aurillac, Constantine the African, and the "man of Bath." Moller's genealogical tracking of editions and translations is intriguing.

Fifteenth-century Venice produced figures such as Cardinal Basilios Bessarion, whose collection of Greek texts is of continuing importance. His collaboration with the astronomer Regiomontanus resulted in a new edition of Ptolemy's *Almagest*. Aldus Manutius and fellow printers ensured that by the year 1500, all the important Greek texts were widely disseminated. Their assimilation into the European intellectual system led to the scientific revolution of succeeding centuries.

I placed *Map of Knowledge* on my pandemic reading list as yet another chore for long, boring COVID evenings. To my surprise and enjoyment, the volume provided one of the most pleasant and informative reading events of the health crisis. The book's organization, writing, and analysis turned what might have been a duty into an exciting learning adventure. It is extensively footnoted and carries illustrations in colour and in black and white. It is highly recommended for students of book history and anyone looking for an interesting and readable book on an important and little-known instance of cultural transmission.

*Copyright* © 2022 Peter F. McNally. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).