CHAPTER 3

Greek Scholarship in the Imperial Era and Late Antiquity*

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1 State of Research, Presuppositions and Focal Points of a Historical Survey

When faced with the task of writing the history of Greek philology and grammar in the Imperial era and Late Antiquity, a period stretching over almost six centuries, a number of difficulties must be addressed even in a summary outline such as this. The greatest problem, which also arises throughout the entire field of ancient philology and grammar, is the preserved source material and the state of its transmission. With very few exceptions, the original writings of the ancient philologists and grammarians have been lost. In their stead, we have to be content with occasional or, in the best cases, a small number of fragments and testimonies from later secondary sources. Therefore, our picture of the contents and developments of ancient scholarship is incomplete and based upon the accidental transmission of evidence. Moreover, many of the philologists and grammarians in this period remain shadowy figures, whose place of activity or the contents and purpose of their writings are largely unknown.

In addition to the insufficient and scant transmission of the source material, the state of current research on the historical and theoretical aspects cannot be described as satisfactory. Study of the philology and grammar of the Imperial era and Late Antiquity has profited relatively little from the expansion and intensity of investigations which, over recent decades, have focused on the Hellenistic—above all the Alexandrian—period, largely motivated by the interest of scholarship in the ‘learned’ character and the philological background of Hellenistic poetry. With regard to the Imperial era and Late

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1 When here and below I speak of “philology and grammar”, I am in no way referring to two different sciences, but to the two essential areas of one and the same discipline called γραμματικὴ τέχνη; on the notion γραμματική, see below in § 2.3 and Swiggers-Wouters (section II.2) in this volume. To avoid misunderstandings and to distinguish the expression from the present-day meaning of the term grammar, the ancient form will be rendered in this article as “philology and grammar”. But occasionally, the equivalent expression ‘grammar’, enclosed in single quotation marks, is also used. The same applies to the representatives of the ancient discipline, the γραμματικοί, who are referred to herein mainly as “philologists and grammarians”, but if at times I often speak simply of grammarians, this characterization is to be understood as encompassing both areas, namely philological interpretation and linguistic analysis.

2 The period to which the present paper refers is specified and explained below in § 2.1.

3 On the philological background of Hellenistic poetry, which finds its expression clearly in the double identity of its representatives, the so-called ‘poets and philologists’ (ποιητῆς ἄξιο