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# Literacy in Ancient Everyday Life – Problems and Results

*Admiror te paries non cecidisse, qui tot scriptorum taedia sustineas.*

“I admire you, Wall, for not having collapsed, despite having been made to endure the tedium of so many writers.”<sup>1</sup>

This statement, scratched into a wall of the amphitheatre at Pompeii by an anonymous writer, sheds an interesting light on the everyday use of writing in an Italian city of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. The writer does not reveal their name, though it was the name above all else that generated identity in society. As such, the great mass of graffiti are generally names.<sup>2</sup> What is truly interesting about these few words, however, is that its ironical author immortalised not only their own literacy but also that of numerous others, who apparently also left their scratched and drawn markings on the city’s buildings. One can imagine a whole range of people among their number, casual passers-by of varying social and economic background, such as idle dalliers, business people, clients waiting on their patrons, and even magistrates and their entourages. The quip quoted here may have been popular in Pompeii, since it was inscribed not only in the amphitheatre, but also at the theatre and on the walls of the basilica – unless of course one wishes to assume that they all were left by the same person.<sup>3</sup>

Who in particular these spectral authors were who left their various, apparently unnecessary or pointless messages (*tot scriptorum taedia*) spattered across the city’s wall-space, and what proportion of Pompeii’s inhabitants partook in this pastime unfortunately largely eludes us today. Nevertheless, the so-called “graffiti habit” provides an important indicator for ancient literacy in its day to day practice, especially since it left individual and spontaneous messages not only in public space, but also in various locations inside houses.<sup>4</sup> Besides the ubiquitous names, one finds practice alphabets, accounts, obscenities, Virgilian verses, declarations of love, curses and many other forms of textual utterances. Graffiti thus neatly illustrate the breadth of textual content as well as the plethora of uses writing saw in everyday life in Antiquity.

To what degree ancient societies were literate and which groups possessed the ability to read and write is a matter of long-standing debate in scholarship. Older

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1 CIL IV 2487.

2 That the majority of all graffiti are names and/or markers of identity has recently been emphasized with some justification by LOHMANN 2017a, 58; for a different view see e. g. MILNOR 2014, 14.

3 CIL IV 1904. 1906. 2461. 2487.

4 BENEFIEL 2011; BENEFIEL 2016; LOHMANN 2017b; for the concept of the “graffiti habit” see COOLEY 2012, 111.

research generally gave rather positive answers, especially regarding the degree of literacy in the Graeco-Roman period,<sup>5</sup> a trend that WILLIAM HARRIS prominently opposed in his seminal monograph on the subject, published in 1989. In his view, structural deficits of ancient societies prevented the acquisition of reading and writing skills by more than a fraction of the population: the lack of a public school system, of technical media and of an appreciation of the written word, among other factors, led HARRIS to postulate that little more than 10 % were literate.<sup>6</sup> Overall, he sees literacy being confined mainly to the privileged parts of society, though he does admit various forms of literacy, as well as different levels of skill, such as “scribal” or “craftsmen’s literacy”. This concept of diversified or “sectoral” literacy<sup>7</sup> has since been refined by other scholars and analysed in various contexts,<sup>8</sup> resulting in differentiated accounts of “monumental, military, commercial” or “elite literacy” (WOOLF 2002, WOOLF 2009), of “functional literacy” (KEEGAN 2014) and even “epigraphic literacy” (BODEL 2010; BODEL 2015).<sup>9</sup> The difficulties inherent in starkly dichotomising illiteracy and literacy, as well as the problem of accurately defining a person’s actual ability to read, write and perform casual arithmetic or handle numbers, have recently been raised once more by GREG WOOLF (2015). He is justified in rejecting a portrayal of ancient societies as fundamentally illiterate and calls for a conceptual adjustment of literacy, which he would like to define as the ability to handle a complex system of graphical signs. According to WOOLF, this skill was commanded by a significant amount of people and rendered them literate in the sense that they were capable of utilizing signs from a complex system of signification for their specific needs.

The complex utilization of writing in ancient every-day life was also the subject of the conference held at Zürich in November of 2016. The papers presented were able to profit from the results of a number of recent studies that pursued similar interests and provided detailed assessments of the primary material, such as minor inscriptions,<sup>10</sup> or the various forms and uses of graffiti culture. These studies have not only

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**5** See e.g. MARQUARDT 1886, 96; for the older research cf. the overview by WERNER 2009.

**6** For the estimates see HARRIS 1989, 327–332.

**7** ASSMANN 2010, 17–10, defines it as script being limited to certain functional areas of the society; however he describes “sectoral literacy” as an earlier cultural stadium in opposition to a later, cultural literacy, which was used to fix and circulate cultural and identity building-texts.

**8** See esp. the volume edited by JOHNSON/PARKER 2009.

**9** Further research has elucidated various functions of literacy by conducting case studies, some of which have been assembled in edited volumes. These touch, for instance, on the themes of politics and the exercise of power (BOWMAN/WOOLF 1994), on the diffusion of the Roman language as a medium of Romanisation (COOLEY 2002), on the culture of reading (JOHNSON/PARKER 2009) as well as on libraries and archives WOOLF/KÖNIG/OIKONOMOPOULOU 2013. BAGNALL 2011 has treated the writing culture of Graeco-Roman Egypt as a regional case study. Eckardt 2018 illuminates writing technology and practice on the basis of material evidence in the Roman world.

**10** FUCHS/SYLVESTRE/SCHMIDT HEIDENREICH 2012.

provided new material for analysis, but also conducted useful case studies on specific themes.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, this conference volume seeks primarily to offer an analysis of ancient literacy from a larger, historical vantage point. As such, the first part broadens the perspective beyond the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean to include early, non-European cultures and serves to establish the larger framework required for a global historical perspective. In the second part, the focus is on the specific value and use of written language in its everyday use in Roman Antiquity, traced in detail across all important aspects of life. Proceeding in this way allows the historically contingent use of writing to emerge from the comparative appreciation of societies from China, India, and Egypt to Persia, revealing differences and similarities in the materials employed, the kinds of texts produced, and the writing processes utilized. More specifically, religious practice, administration and education, as well as select social groups shall be studied for the Roman Empire. The contributions try to assess how exactly and for what purposes writing was used, while also being sensitive to the limits of our knowledge. Can different types of literacy be identified? Are regional differences visible? Does chronological differentiation reveal a historical development?

## A Global Perspective

The first group of contributions provides an overview of the sources for and discussion of the uses made of writing in important cultures of the ancient world. The cultures selected here are early China, India under Ashoka, Pharaonic Egypt, Teispid-Achaemenid Persia, as well as the Graeco-Roman civilisation, all of which are presented at the bleeding edge of current research.

FENG LI uses the “oracle bone inscriptions” from the Shang dynasty (1554–1046 BC) to illustrate the first stage of literacy in ancient China. He interprets these as documenting exclusively royal divination, with the result that the use of writing seems to have been restricted to the peak of society in this period. The younger, bronze inscriptions of the western Zhou dynasty (1045 – 771 BC) show that the use of writing has now spread to the majority of the elite that used precious votive vessels with inscriptions on their inner walls to document their status. In the following periods, writing on bamboo strips, silk and paper attests the growth of the bureaucracy in the time of the “warring states” and the establishment of imperial administration during the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BC–220 AD). This caused the use and proliferation of writing in the population to rise markedly. The key force in this development was thus the political trajectory of empire formation and interior administrative reform.

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<sup>11</sup> CORBIER/GUILHEMBET 2008; BAIRD/TAYLOR 2011; SCHOLZ/HORSTER 2015; see above n. 2 and 4; on graffiti in the ancient world see generally KEEGAN 2014.

HARRY FALK demonstrates that the oral culture of ancient India underwent a remarkable development during the reign of Ashoka (268–232 BC). After the end of Achaemenid rule in what is now northern Pakistan, Ashoka, who was in contact with the Hellenistic world through the Seleucids, introduced stone monuments (inscribed with Kharoshti script, derived from Aramaic) and further had the Brahmi script developed (which incorporated elements of Kharoshti and Greek). Although this benefitted cultural and religious developments, Brahmi was a short-lived and only regionally successful phenomenon, being used only under Ashoka and in the Ganges valley north of his capital. Due to its use in legal documents after the disappearance of Aramaic scribes, the older Kharoshti script, by contrast, was to remain significant for centuries.

For Pharaonic Egypt, KATHARINA ZINN stresses the great significance of the spoken word despite the existence of fully-fledged writing systems, which served to supplement orality in order to provide authoritative, fixed documentation. Literacy was mainly the prerogative of professional scribes who enjoyed high social status, as well as of the educated elite. The time-intensive training required to read and write Egyptian scripts meant that only a small section of the population, between 1–10 %, can be said to have possessed the requisite skills, depending on the definition of literacy used and the time period studied. Nevertheless, writing allowed Egyptian society to use texts and documents, and literacy was thus a central factor in producing its shared, elite culture and its specific culture of memory.

JOSEF WIESEHÖFER studies the role of literality and orality in Teispid-Achaemenid Iran. Overall, the pre-Islamic sources attest to the dominance of the spoken word, although one should not underestimate the impact of administrative documentation and of the royal edicts pronounced for purposes of political representation and legitimation. Besides the late emergence of a literary tradition, the great variety of languages and writing systems used also in official contexts emerge as especially notable features of Iranian literacy. In Achaemenid administration, native Old Persian speakers used Elamite, which they had learned as a second language and syntactically adapted to the rules of their primary language. To facilitate imperial communication throughout the multi-ethnic empire, the already traditional usage of Aramaic was further intensified. Although it served to link imperial communication with regional and local levels of administration, however, Aramaic was not the only “official” language of the empire. The elaborate procedures of dictation and translation in the Achaemenid Empire are clearly visible in the Persepolis archives. Furthermore, heralds, readers, singers and story-tellers will undoubtedly have been important in disseminating information about political or administrative developments to the mass of the illiterate population.

A complementary perspective is offered by IRENE MADREITER, who studies everyday female literacy in the Achaemenid Empire. Traces of such literacy are found mainly in private documents penned by members of lower social strata, which can be considered glimpses of everyday life. All extant evidence stems from the periph-

eral areas of the empire, such as Asia Minor, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Bactria. In the heartland of Fars, for which source material is generally more limited, any pertinent evidence is lacking. MADREITER emphasizes the predominantly oral culture of Fars, though she also sees the lack of female writing not as purely coincidental, but as a reflection of social differences between the conquered periphery and the imperial centre in Fars, for which she generally identifies a lower significance of writing.

Expanding upon the arguments put forward in his 1989 monograph, WILLIAM HARRIS reviews important recent contributions to the debate concerning the extent and social relevance of literacy in the Graeco-Roman period. In doing so, he emphasizes the impact of ideology on Greek education, but also investigates the factors that contributed to the decline in the use of writing observable in Late Antiquity. HARRIS argues that this question can only be adequately addressed if the plurality of languages in use in this period is taken into account. He further calls for a new synthesis, which would fully address the shifting functions of reading and writing, the teaching of these skills, as well as the impact of religious change.

## Roman Empire

The bulk of the volume concentrates on literacy in the Roman Empire. The contributions address various important aspects of ancient everyday life, with the first section seeking to assess the specific literacies of various social groups.

### Social Groups

SABINE HÜBNER studies the degrees of female literacy in Roman Egypt using the three levels of literacy defined by the ancient population itself. 1. Illiterates; 2. “Slow writers”, who were capable of signing their names; 3. Skilled writers. The signatures on lease agreements reveal a rate of literacy (for “slow writers”) of at least 0,32–1,2% among land-owning women and 33–39% among men. Applied to the total population of Egypt, that means that probably no more than 5% of women were able to write. Although the mass of the population thus did not possess the ability to read and write, the sources nevertheless document the omnipresence of reading and writing in everyday life. Access to the information encoded in this form was provided by literate family members and professional helpers.

The central pillar of Roman power in the Empire, the Roman army, is the subject of MICHAEL SPEIDEL’S article. As one of the most successful organisations of the Roman state, the army relied on written administration and communication, as has recently been affirmed once more by newly edited papyri from lower Nubia and other texts. But the soldiers wrote letters and used documents also for private purposes. In addition, the military diplomas serve to remind us of the great value the soldiers attached to the

written materials documenting their service. As such, everyday life in the Roman army was clearly pervaded with reading and writing.

A regional case study is offered by ROGER TOMLIN, who studies the degree of literacy in Roman Britain. By contrast with WILLIAM HARRIS, he takes a slightly more positive view. Besides observing a generally higher level of literacy among the military than among urban civilians, TOMLIN also takes into account source material that provides new information on everyday uses of writing among the rural and urban populace. This includes the so-called “prayers for justice” on lead discovered in the temples at Bath and Uley, as well as the recently published accounts on wooden tablets from Roman London (“Bloomberg tablets”).

Finally, KAI RUFFING discusses the significance of writing and literacy in imperial Roman economics by reviewing accounts preserved on various materials (stone, walls, wooden tablets, papyrus). His study reveals the omnipresence of such documents in everyday life throughout both the Empire’s space and its social strata. Such documentation offered an important tool of control in all varieties of economic transactions and had thus clearly pervaded the economics of the Roman Empire.

### Religious Practice

Writing and written communication had significance also in practical religion, as AMINA KROPP illustrates using the harmful spells inscribed on *defixionum tabellae*. Oral curses were preserved and intensified by being put into writing and encoded on lead tablets. The *defixio* ritual further involved “fixating” the target’s name by piercing it. The written nature of this cult practice therefore had both a communicative and a metaphorical significance. Unfortunately, however, the practice allows few insights into the literacy of the ritual actors, since recurring formulae, pre-made tablets with blanks for names, and the practiced hands in evidence on the extant tablets all point to professional scribes or even specialized workshops.

WOLFGANG SPICKERMANN reviews the development of religious practices in Germany and large parts of Gaul after the Roman conquest, which brought the “epigraphic habit” to these areas and infused regional cult practices with a culture of writing. As the divine names attested in the epigraphic record of these areas show, the indigenous elites turned to new deities under Roman rule. Furthermore, the Celtic and Germanic divine names not only attest various new types of deities, but also that these were appealed to in order to protect Roman structures (*civitates, pagi, curiae*).

### Administration

ANTONIO CABALLOS RUFINO highlights the typical Roman phenomenon of recording juridical texts on bronze tablets, many examples of which survive from Baetica.

Although the bronze material was intended to ensure the meaning and permanence of these documents, its value made recycling very attractive. New finds have allowed CABALLOS to further add to his 2009 catalogue of Baetican bronze inscriptions, bringing the total up to 128. Among their number are a wealth of different genres: city laws, *senatus consulta*, *acta senatus*, imperial letters, communal decrees including *tabulae patronatus* and *hospitalitatis*, military diplomas, as well as various unattributable fragments. The laws and decrees in particular were originally published to ensure monumental documentation in public space. Given the 176 communities of Baetica recorded by Pliny and the fact that these documents were produced for three hundred years, the catalogue surely contains but a tiny fraction of the originally extant bronze inscriptions.

GRAHAM CLAYTOR analyses from a cultural perspective the process of municipalization that transformed the administration and economics of Roman Egypt. In order to assess the role of literacy in everyday life, he picks out the public notaries as a case study. Offices of this kind existed not only in cities, but as *grapheia* also in villages, where they functioned as local institutions run by and for the inhabitants. From Karanis, more than 1000 contracts are attested from the local *grapheion* for the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. This corpus shows that the people who made use of this institution possessed the kind of basic literacy that would place them in the category of “slow writers”. This means that the use of writing was normal in official business and administration not only in the cities but also in rural areas. On the other hand, cases like that of Aurelius Isidorus caution us that even estate owners could be illiterate. Between the second and the fourth century AD, use of writing and literacy in general changed significantly in the Egyptian province, with the result that scribes and notaries came to be clustered in the metropoleis of the nomes.

A rather broader question is raised by PAUL SCHUBERT, who tries to reconstruct who wrote in Graeco-Roman Egypt and for what purposes. He is able to show that writing was important for officials and private individuals alike, who used it particularly for legal and tax affairs, business and communicating with relatives. A special range of documents specifically tailored for this purpose by professional scribes reveals that the organization of their sections and clauses was intended to help less skilled writers make use of them. The blanks left in these documents, which SCHUBERT calls “windows”, allowed those of lesser skill to personalize them. Such windows can be identified in various types of documents, especially in the sacrifice certificates required after the edict of Decius in 250 AD. Overall, it becomes clear that in law and administration, a certain degree of written documentation and communication was unavoidable, but could of course be satisfied by paying a professional.

Finally, the article by BENJAMIN HARTMANN leads into the heart of imperial power, as it explains the central role of the *scribae* in the Roman state. As subaltern clerks of the magistrates they administered their written documentation (including *fasti* and *legis actiones*), checked account books and maintained the archives. As such, they were experts in the nexus of writing at the core of the Republican state. The

world of the Roman *scribae* was the world of documentary scribability in the form of the *tabulae publicae*. Their position as dutiful and respected wardens of the state's records afforded the Roman *scribae* not only financial gain but also social advancement through connections.

## Education

MARIETTA HORSTER attempts to assess the level of historical knowledge among the population of the Empire. To do so, she reviews various heuristic methods and sources capable of revealing such “everyday knowledge” and its significance in the daily lives of the educated. Among other things, she is able to show that inscriptions record not only elite communication, but can also serve as evidence for the appreciation of historiography and historians. Papyri can likewise occasionally provide relevant information, though they always need to be considered in their social, geographical and chronological contexts. The number of extant literary papyri containing historiographical texts is so small that already a small number of new finds could change what we believe to know about a period's preferences for specific authors or historical subjects.

WINFRIED SCHMITZ traces the development of the Latin language and its use in the late antique and early medieval funerary inscriptions (4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century AD) from the area of Rhine and Mosel. Over the course of these four centuries, high Latin developed first into provincial Mosellian Latin and then into an early Romance language. The funerary texts further show changes in wording and content: the increasing predominance of single names and the disappearance of information about people's origins, offices and professions seem to suggest a focus on family and Christian values. In rural regions, SCHMITZ observes a significant decline in the use of Latin and of literacy in general: Latin words and clauses are used without coherent sentence structures, while other stones are entirely uninscribed or bear geometrical decorations and symbols instead of letters.

## Results

Literacy, its precise definition and delineation, as well as its significance are an important field of historical research due to the relevance of writing and script for many areas of the ancient world and the lives lived in it. The concept of diversified or sectoral literacy, with different levels of competence in writing, reading and mathematics, allows scholars to differentiate the use of writing in everyday life by the types and areas of usage, as well as identify different functions of such literacy.

Various social groups developed different functional literacies tailored to their everyday needs – if these required some form of writing. This is particularly true of



administrative and legal concerns, as well as various economic affairs. That notwithstanding, the great mass of the population of the Roman Empire could surely neither write nor read and comprehend longer texts – although being able to read *lapidariae litterae* was evidently not uncommon, as is revealed by Petronius' ribbing of social risers (Petron. Sat. 58,7) as well as the erasures in imperial inscriptions, milestones and local honorary inscriptions.

The evidence provided by papyrology in particular should further caution scholars against attributing widespread literacy to those wealthier groups below the ordines of senators, knights and decurions. Although they were often reliant on written documents, many landowners or local officials were clearly illiterate.

The higher rates of literacy observable in the army by contrast with the population at large are due to its tight organization and importance as an instrument of power. Similarly, the higher rates observable in urban contexts can be attributed to the plethora of options that hub communities – unlike rural areas – could offer, such as education, culture, administration, law, or employment. Nevertheless, the need for writing, as well as its everyday use, is also in evidence for rural areas.

Considering non-Mediterranean and, in part, older civilizations, especially in India or Pharaonic Egypt, reminds us how fundamental the spoken word was in Antiquity. Its codification in writing evolved to reinforce and consolidate this importance, and thus only ever constituted one component of both public and private communication. In principle, ancient societies were oral societies. The spread of writing culture was often spearheaded by political initiatives to develop fiscal and administrative structures. Trade routes and economic activities likewise helped spread the culture of writing, but only in the Roman Empire do people's everyday lives seem to have become more deeply affected by this development due to the sheer size, structural unity, stability and durability of this imperial construct. Wherever some form of writing was unavoidable and one unable to perform it oneself, it was always possible to use friends and relatives or to pay a specialist able to lend "secondhand literacy".<sup>12</sup> Last but not least, it is this phenomenon that drives home how important writing was as a cultural medium and that its impact upon everyday life in ancient societies should not be underestimated.

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<sup>12</sup> HARRIS 1989, 35.

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