

ONE

INTRODUCTION: LITERACIES, POWER AND IDENTITIES

Writing is language made material.

(Haas 1996, 3)

There is no single definition of literacy, as the term can encompass the ability to read and write as well as degrees of cultural refinement (e.g. Bagnall 2011, 2; Franklin 2002, 2–5; McKitterick 1990, 2; Small 1997, xv; Thomas 1992, 1–11). Literacy is also often taken to relate to levels of competence and learning. In Roman times, literate activities may have ranged from an ability to sign a document or read an inscription to skilled composition. Today, literacy is often seen as a measure of integration into society, defining both the successful child and the employable adult (e.g. O’Keefe 1990, 10). In many ancient societies professional scribes existed, and individuals were frequently operating in a multilingual environment. Literacy affects all members of a society, including those that cannot read, and obviously has a close and complex relationship with orality. Reading and writing are often seen as one of the defining characteristics of western culture, and consequently there is a long and rich tradition of research on literacy. However, it is important to realise that the graphocentrism of our society may blind us to differences in the past (Bowman and Woolf 1994, 1). This chapter aims to give a flavour of previous work on the topic, with a particular emphasis on scholars concerned with the Roman world. Researching this book made me once more aware of the need for dialogue between archaeologists, classicists, papyrologists and palaeographers

(cf. Moreland 2006). I hope I am able to offer at least a glimpse into the important research of those who deal primarily with texts, while adding a material turn to the topic. To this end, in what follows I am especially interested in research on the *practice* and *materiality* of writing. At the heart of this book lies the nature of the relationship between the material nature of the ‘information technology’ of writing and sociocultural change in the Roman period.

This book offers a consideration of the role writing played in Roman society through the medium of material culture, focusing on one particular, previously completely neglected object – the metal inkwell. Inkwells are relatively small vessels, made from a range of materials, notably Samian pottery, glass and copper-alloy. Their social and cultural significance lies in the association with writing and literacy, but as this book will show, metal inkwells in particular also offer significant insights into elite behaviour and patterns of consumption. While metal inkwells have long been published as individual finds, overview discussions so far have been limited to brief summaries (Božič and Feugère 2004; Fünfschilling 2012) and analysis of the material from a single province or site (e.g. Bilkei 1980; Koster 1997, 2013; Öllerer 1998). This book instead examines metal inkwells as a category from across the Roman Empire, exploring not just their forms, chronology and distribution, and social and economic meanings but also the embodied practice of their use.

APPROACHES TO ANCIENT LITERACIES

From the 1960s onwards, a number of social scientists began to explore the impact and long-term effects of writing on the organisation of societies. Perhaps most prominent amongst these is Goody, who wrote about the ways in which ‘literate technologies’ affect the very structure of society. Goody (1968) considers writing not simplistically as the single cause of change, but sees cognitive, social and economic changes as one of the consequences or implications of this new form of communication. The profound change in modes of thought caused by new means of communication is argued to be a more useful way of thinking about different types of societies than dividing them into ‘primitive’ and ‘advanced’ (Goody 1977, 1986, 2000).

In reaction to the initial focus on literacy, research then began to focus on the relationship between orality and literacy. The term was coined to avoid describing societies simply in terms of an absence of literacy (i.e. as illiterate). The vast majority of languages exist only in oral form, and orality is argued to necessitate specific modes of thought and expression, with a particular emphasis on the role of memory (Ong 1982, 1986). But just as Goody and others were in danger of overemphasising the role of writing, and in particular alphabetic writing, in the development of rational thought and even democracy, there is a danger that oral societies are idealised and assumed to

all have certain mentalities. More subtle approaches have instead stressed the fact that orality and literacy are not mutually exclusive, as elements of oral culture persist well beyond the introduction of writing, be that in the form of dictation and reading aloud in many ancient societies or the ‘secondary orality’ of radio and TV today (Olson and Torrance 1991; Thomas 1992). Recent work in the Roman world emphasises competence in sign use and links with numeracy rather than a rigid focus on the tension between orality and literacy (Woolf 2015).

While Goody and others were crucial in highlighting the importance of literacy and its implications, their work has been accused of technological determinism (Street 1984, 44–65). This ‘autonomous model’ sees writing as a technology with consequences (including cognitive changes) that develop almost independently of the social setting; it can be contrasted with Street’s ‘ideological model’, which views writing very much as the product of social and cultural practices within particular settings and power structures (cf. Franklin 2002, 2–9; Street 1984, 95–125). In a reaction to the initial emphasis that saw societal change very much as a consequence of literacy, more recent research has therefore focused on the *context* of *literacies* and on literacy as a set of social practices. There is now a much greater concern with the changing literate practices of a particular society and a growing awareness of the varied ways in which writing can be used in different societies (e.g. Keller-Cohen 1994; Schausboe and Larsen 1989).

It is worth noting, for example, not just the enormous variety of materials employed but also the increasing recognition that the development of writing occurred not just in response to the bureaucratic needs of emerging complex states but especially in China and Mesoamerica also had religious, symbolic and magical functions (e.g. Fischer 2001; Gaur 1984; Harris 1986; Senner 1989; Woods 2010). The same has been argued for early Greek literacy, and indeed the beginnings of Latin (e.g. Lomas 2007a; Thomas 1992). Letters and the act of writing itself can have magical significance even for illiterates, as evidenced, for example, by Danish folklore (Holbek 1989). As an aside, it is interesting to note that no Roman deity is associated and depicted with writing equipment, in contrast to, for example, the Egyptian goddess of writing and wisdom Seshat. On an Egyptianising lamp of the first century AD she is depicted with an inkwell dangling from her left wrist and holding what may be a pen in her right hand (Bailey 1980, 211; Donadoni 1997, 67; brought to my attention by Nina Crummy).

While Goody was interested in literacy as a facilitating technology, these more nuanced approaches are concerned with literacy as something that ‘was used as a tool for creating and maintaining elite social status and domination, and for representing cultural identities of communities or individual groups within them’ (Lomas 2007a, 12). In contrast to those that view literacy as

a technology for advancement and empowerment, literacy and in particular schooling can be seen as enabling a form of hegemony and control; for example, a classic analysis of nineteenth-century statistical data from Canada shows that literacy made little difference to occupation and wealth while ethnicity and class origin did (Graff 1979). A similar case has been made for the south-eastern United States (Heath 1983). In this way several authors have developed more nuanced understandings of the relationship between writing and power, rather than seeing writing simply as a technology of enlightenment and progress. For example, Gaur (2000) sees writing as an element of the infrastructure that can develop or maintain dominant positions within a given society or be used to aid the spread of empires and religions. Others have considered not just power relations expressed through writing but the cultural values and communicative strategies of specific societies (e.g. Houston 2004; Keller-Cohen 1994). A focus on power and identity in colonial and post-colonial contexts is viewed as a way of challenging both the lasting impact of the autonomous model on policy making and the particularising and relativist tendencies of the ideological model (Collins and Blot 2003). While most publications are concerned with the invention of writing systems and their impact, recently the disappearance and replacement of scripts has also been considered (Baines et al. 2008).

One period for which the specific historical context of writing has been explored in depth, and one from which useful parallels with the Roman world can be drawn, is the medieval period. There are of course clear differences between Roman and medieval literacy, notably in the religious framework, but there are also similarities in practice such as the importance of dictation and reading aloud, and in concepts of learning and erudition. While materials varied, with the use of colour, gold and parchment setting medieval books apart in terms of monetary value, in both the Roman and medieval periods books were socially and culturally highly valued, and used for gift giving and exchange between high-status individuals (McKitterick 1989, 135–164). The debates between medievalists about when the step change in literacy levels occurred (e.g. Clanchy 1993; Stock 1983 vs. McKitterick 1989) are not relevant to this discussion, but there are several general concepts that provide interesting comparisons for the Roman world. One is the idea of *literate ways of thinking* or a *literate mentality*, which Clanchy (1993) argues was gradually introduced even to serfs in the period between 1066 and 1307, based on the increased use of records, charters and other documents. This shift from memory and collective oral testimony to trusting written documents was not automatic, with good reason, given the number of forged charters created during this period. Rather, there was a mix of oral and literate modes, and written forms were adapted to oral practice (cf. Stock 1983, who sees this change as occurring slightly later). Societies such as those of the early medieval period have also

been characterised as possessing ‘transitional literacy’, which is not related to the number of literate people, but to the changing decoding strategies and visual conventions employed by a given society (O’Keefe 1990).

Another interesting model is that of *textual communities*, a phrase coined originally for heretical and reformist groups where ‘texts play a dominant role in the internal and external relationships of the members’ (Stock 1983, 90). Texts can be read aloud and shape discourse within textual communities, influencing not only those who can read for themselves but also illiterates. Some scholars have distinguished between scribal and lay literacy to highlight the fact that even non- or semi-literate individuals need certain competencies and knowledge to participate in literate societies (Illich 1991; cf. Rees Jones 2003).

What I find striking when reading the academic discourse on medieval literacy is that there can be a lack of engagement with the physical practice of writing and the actual writing equipment, perhaps as a consequence of the wealth of textual data. Thus, in a book of 345 pages, only 12 pages and no illustrations are devoted to writing materials (Clanchy 1993, 114–125). A laudable and inspiring exception is Willemsen (2008), who examined the education system in the Netherlands and north-western Europe generally between 1300 and 1600. She focused not just on written and iconographic sources but deliberately studied the material culture associated with writing and objects excavated from known schools (Willemsen 2008, 53–87; cf. De Hamel 1992, 29–32). There is also now a catalogue of northern European medieval writing equipment, including styli, book fittings and even glasses (Krüger 2002).

A lack of engagement with the *material practice* of writing in general is now beginning to be addressed in literacy studies. This can take the form of agency theory, exploring the interplay between social structure, individual action and material world, as in a recent study with a particular focus on Mesopotamian and Mayan writing (Englehardt and Nakassis 2013; cf. Scribner and Cole 1981). In my view, more successful is a recent edited volume that examines writing as a form of material culture and the contexts of its production and consumption (Piquette and Whitehouse 2013; cf. Whitehouse 2013b). Archaeological case studies illustrate the ways in which particular materials or tools may influence the act and detailed execution of writing (e.g. Kidd 2013 and Johnston 2013) and trace sequences of technical action such as drafting and erasure (e.g. Piquette 2013). New imaging techniques help us better to understand details of the material and of the writer’s practice (Figure 1.1). There are also discussions of the bodily actions and sensory perception of both producers and users, ranging from the different materials used to write in Greek and demotic¹ (Kidd 2013) to the physical experience of reading inscriptions that

¹ Egyptian script.



1.1. The materiality of writing: lead curse tablet from Uley with RTI (Reflectance Transformation Imaging) visualisation to show surface details and writer's ductus (Photograph and RTI detail by kind permission of Kathryn E. Piquette, Courtesy Roger Tomlin and Trustees of the British Museum).

literally twist around stone monuments (Whitehouse 2013a). A deliberately material perspective focusing on writing equipment and how it was used was also recently employed to examine the scribes of Ancient Egypt (Pinarello 2015). While the wide range of materials used for early writing has of course long been noted (e.g. Daniels and Bright 1996; Gaur 1984), recent work on, for example, cuneiform writing deliberately looks beyond the signs to examine the colour, shape and surface format of clay tablets and the shape and use of styli in order to understand scribal practice holistically (Taylor 2011). Similar research has been conducted on the materials used by prolific nineteenth-century letter writers (Hall 2000).

Along similar lines, a recent edited volume explores the material aspects of magic, and in particular the ingenious ways in which writing and text can be used to protect or harm. Examples range from textual amulets in ancient Egypt and Greek and Roman 'voodoo dolls' bearing the names of those cursed to inscribed rings and amulets (Boschung and Bremmer 2015).

Writing has also been viewed as a technique and a technology, and its impact has been compared to other step changes in information technology, such as printing and electronic media (e.g. Eisenstein 1979; Hobart and Schiffman 1998). However, it is crucial to avoid a deterministic and instrumental view of technology, and instead consider how writing technologies such as computers do not merely assist but shape human thought (Haas 1996; Norman 1993). There is a symbiotic relationship between the tools and the cognitive activity, but it is often only possibly to really 'see' writing technology at points of change, as otherwise its use is so habitual as to go unchallenged. We will

explore these ideas in much more detail for the Roman period by considering exactly how inkwells and associated writing materials were used and how the actions of the writers may have been shaped by the physical features of these objects (see Chapter 3).

LITERACIES IN THE ROMAN WORLD

Literacy is one of the defining elements of Roman culture; the ability to read and write was important not just to the elite through ideological concepts such as *paideia* and *humanitas* but also to commerce and to the military and administrative machinery of Empire. Owning books represented a substantial investment in the Roman world; for example, it has been calculated that a copy of the Aeneid cost the equivalent of 160 litres of wine (McKitterick 1989, 137). Clearly the workings of the state and economy relied on literate individuals. The work seen by many as kick-starting the modern interest in the topic was Harris's (1989) *Ancient Literacy*; his Roman section in particular was primarily concerned with levels of literacy, but also addressed the various uses of literacy and differences across the social and class spectrum and across the various parts of the Empire. Here and in subsequent work, for example when discussing inscriptions on *instrumentum domesticum*, he stressed the limitations on widespread literacy that existed in the ancient world (Harris 1995). There were some responses to the relatively low estimate (5–10 per cent) of literacy levels made by Harris (1989, 175–284; e.g. papers in Humphrey 1991; also Bagnall 2011; Corbier 2006, 77–90; Laes and Strubbe 2014, 99), but it is now accepted that although the Roman Empire was 'awash with documents', relatively few individuals 'possessed that broad set of skills in creating and using texts that today we term full literacy' (Woolf 2009, 46).

The debate in general has moved on to wider questions about the role of literacy in Roman society (e.g. Bagnall 2011; Bowman and Woolf 1994; Corbier 2006; Cooley 2002; Harris 1989; Humphrey 1991; Pearce 2004; Tomlin 2011; Woolf 1996, 2000, 2009). These have included the interplay between orality and literacy and the concept of a literate mentality as well as the role of memory (e.g. Draper 2004; Habinek 2009; McKay 2008; Small 1997; Watson 2001). In a society shaped by oral discourse and public speech and yet permeated by the power and importance of documents, lines between literacy and illiteracy were blurred. Clearly, it was possible to exploit the reading abilities of a small group to communicate information orally to many others, whether dealing with inscriptions or written documents such as ownership records or private letters (Bowman 1991; Hanson 1991; Raybould 1999, 1; Stauner 2004, 195). Similarly, dictation and the use of literate individuals as scribes enabled those who could not write themselves to participate in official and legal as

well as personal communications. Literacy has also been viewed as a communication technology, which was revolutionised in scale and speed from the Augustan period onwards, with a profound impact on society and economy (Haynes 2002).

Other factors to consider are the ways in which reading and writing intersected with spoken languages in different parts of the Empire. For the provinces the adoption of Latin can be viewed positively in terms of linguistic and cultural-political unification or negatively in terms of subjugation and the gradual loss of native languages (Cooley 2002, 9–10). Recent research on multilingualism has highlighted the complex and dynamic ways in which languages and identities interact and develop in the fluid contact zones created by the Empire and introduced the concept of code-switching rather than creolisation or hybridisation (e.g. Adams 2003; Harris 1989, 259–282; Mullen 2013a, 2013b, 2016; Mullen and James 2012; Wallace-Hadrill 2008; Woolf 1994). Some authors have drawn attention to the link between literacy and numeracy, and it has been suggested that a high frequency of age rounding, usually to multiples of five, in inscriptions may indicate an ignorance of age and possibly also innumeracy, which was in turn linked to illiteracy (Duncan-Jones 1977; cf. Churchin 1995, 471–473; Hanson 1991, 183–187).

Interesting footnotes to the discussion about literacy are attempts to expand the term's usage beyond the skills of reading and writing, such as in the now extensive literature on emotional literacy, especially within an educational and therapeutic context (e.g. Antidote 2003; Spendlove 2008), and in the concept of cultural literacy. The latter was developed by Hirsch (1987), who argues that a shared understanding of cultural concepts and histories is far more important than the mechanical skill of reading; his list of 'knowledge that every American should know' has been influential in conservative education policy in the United States and the United Kingdom. In a Roman context, cultural literacy could be achieved through what has been termed 'visual literacy', i.e. the ability to interpret and decode the complex iconography of the Roman world (Ferris 2012, 25–29; Franklin 2002, 229–254; Hodos 2010, 19–23).

Clearly, literacy is 'not a single phenomenon, but a highly variable package of skills in using texts' (Bowman and Woolf 1994, 2); for the Roman period it therefore seems apt to talk of *literacies* and to prioritise the particular significance of literate activities within specific historical contexts and in particular locales. This is not the place to evaluate the vast literature on the subject (but see Werner 2009 for a convenient recent summary); instead I will briefly consider two themes that are especially relevant to this book, namely power and identities and the concept of *practice*. Both of these have the potential to transcend the divide between grand theory and case study (Bowman and Woolf 1994, 4).

Power

In the classic original study of the topic, Bowman and Woolf (1994, 6) suggest that literacy relates to power, both in terms of ‘power over texts and power exercised by means of their use’. Texts are closely related to power in social, political, economic and religious contexts; power over texts can, for example, be exercised by restricting access to them while power through texts relates to, for example, laws, census lists and history (Bowman and Woolf 1994, 6–10). Literacy has thus been viewed as an instrument of institutional control and cultural cohesiveness (Bowman 1994, 111; cf. Cooley 2002). Moreland (2006) has also argued for writing as a technology of power, with both oppressive and transformative potential.

Classic case studies concern the meaning and power of inscriptions, which shaped and influenced the lives of even those who could not themselves read them; this monumental use of writing made particular identities, such as those of the military or of freedmen, visible and helped express relationships between the state and its citizens (e.g. Häussler and Pearce 2007; Keegan 2014a; Pearce 2004, 44; Woolf 1996). Inscriptions could have complicated biographies, including erasure, re-use and incorporation into new structures, reflecting their changing contexts and powers (e.g. Cooley 2000). Recently, Sears et al. (2015) have explored the relationship between both inscriptions and graffiti and movement through the Roman city. Graffiti in particular have seen much recent innovative study, as they offer interesting insights into the practice of writing within urban and private space (e.g. Baird and Taylor 2011). Graffiti can also be taken as an insight into ‘working-class’ literacy as many appear to be written by people of modest social standing. Mouritsen (2015) shows that for Pompeii many writers may have been slaves and freedmen in elite households, where some schooling may have been provided to enable commercial and domestic activities; this is supported by analysis of the names represented.

While much of the research on literacy has focused on the importance of public inscriptions or early record-keeping systems, writing was also a powerful tool when applied to the ephemeral medium of letters. Letters were used for three sets of relationships that were central to Roman culture: client–patron relationships, friendships (*amicitia*) and household relationships (Richards 2004, 13–46; Stowers 1986, 27–31). Both the papyri of Egypt and the Vindolanda tablets demonstrate the many ways in which a letter could be used to ask for patronage; honour, scold or console someone; or request provisions or give orders (Bowman 1994, 123; cf. Pearce 2013, 138). The very act of writing could also have magical-ritual powers, as could the written word through, for example, liturgies or calendars (Beard 1991; Gordon and Marco Simón 2010; Moreland 2006, 142; Pearce 2013, 138; cf. Goody 1968, 11–20).

Writing enabled a form of domination to be imposed and sustained even on illiterate individuals (Pearce 2004, 44; cf. Draper 2004), but the time is perhaps ripe to reconsider the empowering qualities of the ability to read and write. It is important to remember that individuals and groups could use these skills to pursue their own agendas (Cooley 2002, 13; Woolf 1994, 89). In other words, we may ask what writing was for and what it did in the societies that made up the Roman Empire. A central thesis of this book is that literacy, or perhaps more accurately learning, was a symbol and representation of status, displayed both on wall paintings and on funerary monuments (e.g. Ambs and Faber 1998, 462–463; see also Chapter 8) and through writing equipment itself, especially in a funerary context. It has been argued that ‘finds from a funerary context need not necessarily be linked to an individual’s capacity to read and write. Potentially they acted as a status symbol to evoke the acquisition of Roman culture comparable to bathing equipment’ (Häussler and Pearce 2007, 230). However, presumably anyone buried with bathing equipment had at least a vague idea of Roman bathing, and I would argue the same for writing equipment. At the very least there is an aspiration on the part of the deceased or the mourners to display a literate mentality. We will see throughout the book that there are of course nuances; thus scribes were considered as ‘low status’ by the very elite of the City of Rome but this is not to say they, as a group or as individuals, were not proud of their status in their *self-representations* relative to the rest of the population (see Chapter 11). I have argued elsewhere that there were subtle but important differences in how writing equipment was used (Eckardt 2014, 177–207). For example, in Britain and other provinces, objects such as Minerva wax spatula handles and highly decorated metal inkwells are a form of elite display, and we will explore this in detail (see Chapters 2 and 8).

Practice

The literature on the practices of literacy can conveniently be divided into studies concerned with reading and those concerned with writing (cf. Werner 2009, 336); the latter are obviously more central to this book and writing practices are considered in detail in Chapter 3. This section therefore considers the practices of reading in the Roman world only.

Much research on reading is concerned with the debate about whether the Romans read silently or aloud, about how people learned to read and about the mechanics of reading *scriptio continua* (writing in continuous letters that leaves no space between words and with relatively little punctuation), which appears extremely difficult to the modern eye (e.g. Burnyeat 1997; Gavrilov 1997; Kenyon 1951; Valette-Cagnac 1997). This form of writing provided little paralinguistic information and, therefore, placed more responsibility for interpretation on the reader (Johnson 2012, 25; cf. Small 1997, 14–25). This could be