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0521584663 - Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

Teresa Morgan

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I

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

Picture, for a moment, the forum at Pompeii, some time in the first century of the common era. The irregular white oblong is seething with people; sunlight hammers through a cloud of stone dust. At one end stands the town's Temple of Jupiter, flanked by two vast disorderly markets, one for cereals and one for provisions, where merchants bawl and customers jostle and brandish handfuls of small coins. In a quieter corner to the right, by the sanctuary of the City *Lares*, two altogether more substantial businessmen huddle in conference about the olive harvest. Their fingers fly: they are talking big money.¹ A nearby scribe at a wooden stall watches, fascinated by the size of the figures they are miming, and his customer orders him roughly to get on with drafting his complaint, or he won't be paid. The scribe retorts that he can get more for finishing an already overdue copy of Ovid for a wealthy citizen. It is not easy, he points out, to put down and pick up a poem without the script showing any trace of the change from documentary to book hand. Besides, he likes copying poetry: there aren't many saucy bits in legal documents.

From the other end of the forum comes a low continuous murmur, punctuated by shouts: the sounds of the law-court and the Council chamber. The senior and junior magistrates have three elegant new offices on either side of the chamber, which opens off a colonnade facing the Temple of Jupiter across the length of the forum. The Council is discussing the erection of a shrine to the Fortune of Augustus. It will have the usual dedicatory inscription (which will survive the eruption in 79 to be identified by archaeologists).² The members

¹ Complex counting on the fingers is illustrated by Bonner (1977) fig. 17.

² *CIL* x 187.

Cambridge University Press

0521584663 - Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

are briefly distracted by a faint roar from around the corner, where some defending orator is thundering to the climax of his oration. Outside, a passing junior magistrate on his way to the debate chases a ribbon-seller from the doorway of the Temple of Apollo. His slave trails behind his arms full of wax tablets and papyrus rolls and his nose in the air.

Down a narrow, rutted side street, where tall brick buildings block out all but a streak of sun, a goldsmith tots up his takings. He counts and curses under his breath as his pen snags on the back of the cheap papyrus. A boy and his *paedagogus* on their way to school stare condescendingly at him as they pass and make their way across the forum. Under the limestone portico, the grammar teacher is already surrounded by a group of pupils. But the boy soon gets into trouble. He has not prepared his reading lesson and the teacher orders two other pupils to strip him and hoist him onto their backs. ‘How many times do I have to tell you’, he roars as he brings down the switch again and again, ‘that if you don’t learn your letters you won’t get anywhere in life?’³ The other pupils stare down at their papyrus rolls and hope they won’t be picked on.⁴

Literacy is everywhere in this scene, and not solely by contrivance. From the fifth century BCE, if not earlier, the written word was a fact of everyday life throughout the Greek and Roman worlds. It was used in most aspects of politics and administration, religion, law, the economy, military affairs, and of course, in the literary culture which forms so large a part of our contact with antiquity.⁵ These were profoundly literate societies, despite the relatively small number of functional literates and probably much smaller number of deeply literate people of whom we have evidence.⁶ Literacy, in public

³ See below, pp. 130ff.

⁴ A line drawing of a painting which no longer survives shows this scene: Bonner (1977) fig. 11, Ward-Perkins and Claridge (1976).

⁵ The uses of literacy varied from state to state; some, like classical Sparta, were notoriously low in literacy (Boring (1979), W. Harris (1989) 112–14, though see *contra* Cartledge (1978)).

⁶ On levels of literacy see below, nn. 19, 24, 67.

Cambridge University Press

0521584663 - Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

or in private, was a way of living, a way of working and a way of thinking.⁷

And where there was literacy, there was literate education.⁸ If you moved from Pompeii to Arpinum or further afield to Athens or Aphrodisias, Bordeaux or Oxyrhynchus, some elements of my opening scene would be similar and others would be very different. But at any time from the early third century BCE until the end of the Roman empire,⁹ you could be fairly sure of finding a teacher, or more than one, in most towns and many villages, in the forum, at the crossroads, in the gymnasium, or in a private house or garden.¹⁰ Some might be teaching no more than the rudiments of literacy and numeracy while others carried their own commentaries on the *Iliad*;¹¹ some might be respected intellectuals and well-known public figures, while others, in all probability, knew little more than they taught to their pupils, and if pupils wanted to write poetry or study rhetoric, astronomy or philosophy, they would have to go elsewhere, to centres of learning – Alexandria, Pergamum, Rome, Carthage, Athens. But teachers of one kind or another flourished throughout the Hellenistic and Roman worlds.

More than that: what they taught, at any given level, recurs again and again in the surviving evidence in remarkably similar forms across vast geographical distances, a wide social spectrum and a timespan of nearly a thousand years. As we shall see, surviving descriptions and examples of the exercises used to teach literacy and numeracy and their associated disciplines, suggest that much the same exercises in the same order

⁷ On the cognitive effects of literacy see e.g. Havelock (1982) (though perhaps overstated), Robb (1983), R. Thomas (1992).

⁸ I use the terms 'literate education' and 'numerate education' with slightly unusual meanings throughout, for lack of better terms. Strictly, 'literate education' should include mathematics, if written down. I use it to mean the part of education based on reading and writing literature, including other literary and related exercises, chiefly grammar and rhetoric. I use 'numerate education' to refer to counting exercises, arithmetic, geometry, algebra, astronomy and theoretical music, most of which, in the Hellenistic period and later, were also written down.

⁹ And beyond; on the development of the trivium and quadrivium in late antiquity and beyond see Howie (1969).

¹⁰ On venues in the classical period see below, pp. 9ff.

¹¹ Below, p. 15.

Cambridge University Press

0521584663 - Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

Teresa Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

were taught, from the third century BCE onwards, everywhere from the palaces of kings and emperors to the village street.

Education is always education for something, and the most interesting aspect of ancient education is its relationship with other parts of culture and society. It stands in intriguing relation to literary culture because the largest single component of its literate side was the reading of Greek or Latin authors. Some of those who received a literate education will have come from highly cultured social groups, for whom reading and writing literature were part of life, even a vocation. Others will have hoped to break into such groups. Others again will never have hoped to write poetry or perform in festivals, but their literature will have given them a degree of status and a repertoire of Greek or Roman values which they might or might not incorporate into their everyday lives. Still others – slaves and women, for example – may have been educated for little more than decoration, or as a professional skill, and for these education's cultural and ethical sides may have been irrelevant or problematic, and its promise to confer status on the learner, paradoxical. All these people will have read some of the same texts, and what they learnt, combined with who they were when they learned it and who they later became, made literate education both a binding and a differentiating force, an indicator and a transformer of cultural status.

The social and political implications of education were every bit as complex as the cultural, because those who were taught went on to live, work and relate to one another in society in ways which, it is reasonable to assume, will have been in some way affected by their education. Not least of the interesting aspects of ancient education is the way in which it forms a bridge (not, of course, the only one) between literary culture and politics and society.

In the preceding paragraphs, I have largely assumed that 'education' means the teaching of literacy and numeracy. It is that type of education, more specifically its literate side, which is the focus of this study. This, of course, is an artificial and to some extent an arbitrary focus. To isolate any one strand from a society's complex of educational practices is bound to

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0521584663 - Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

Teresa Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

be arbitrary, for there can be few aspects of life, ancient or modern, in which what is recognized for many purposes as a discrete phenomenon has such contestable boundaries. To focus on the 'three Rs' may seem both limited and suspiciously anachronistic. After all, even late twentieth-century schools, which are heavily biased in favour of literate and numerate education, regularly include technical drawing, athletics and even community service. In the ancient context, why exclude gymnastics, military training or learning a trade?¹²

It will, I hope, become clear that my definition is derived from the surviving sources. These are principally of two kinds. A number of Greek and Roman authors devote works to education or deal with it in works on other subjects. Some such works, like Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, are utopian; others claim to describe contemporary educational practices with a greater or lesser degree of systematization or idealization. In the latter category come the educational passages in Cicero's *De oratore* (*On oratory*), Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (*Training of an orator*), Philo's *On mating with the preliminary studies*, Ps.-Plutarch's *On the education of children* and many more. In addition to literary sources, we have some hundreds of papyri, mainly from Graeco-Roman Egypt, containing fragments of teachers' handbooks and pupils' exercises, which form evidence of education in practice in towns and villages in one Hellenistic state which became a Roman province.¹³ A large part of this study will be the systematic

¹² A good example of a borderline educational context would be the young Roman orator who attends the law-courts with a more experienced man.

¹³ Appendix II lists those I define as 'schooltexts'. I include texts written in both pupils' and teachers' hands in this term, partly because it is often hard to distinguish the two, but mainly because I shall be concentrating on their content rather than on teaching methods, so who wrote them is less important than the fact that they were used in an educational context. There is a number of Greek–Demotic texts (Tassier (1992)), Greek–Coptic texts (Hasitzka (1990)) and Greek–Latin texts (Cavenaile (1958), Gaebel (1969–70)), a few Latin ones (Cavenaile (1958), Moore (1924)) and a much larger number of Coptic examples, which I do not discuss systematically. Coptic schooltexts show much the same range of exercises as those in Greek: alphabets, syllabaries, wordlists, letter formats, gnomic texts, Christian texts, grammar, lists of numbers and arithmetic. There are perhaps no more than a dozen Latin schooltexts, but their contents are much like those of

Cambridge University Press

0521584663 - Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

Teresa Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

comparison of these two types of sources to see whether and when they coincide, and when practices in literary texts and papyri, and in the rather different social groups from which they derive, diverge. Less often, I shall use a range of other educational material which survives in smaller quantities: inscriptions, manuscripts, and papyri from other parts of the Graeco-Roman world.

As I shall argue, both literary accounts and the papyri indicate that literate and numerate education constitute a distinct category among educational practices. They appear to have been conducted and discussed separately from physical education; as for vocational education, after the fourth century BCE even skilled professions such as medicine are absent from texts to do with literate and numerate education, and the natural assumption is that they were regarded as a separate area of education.

Within the relatively narrow category of literate and numerate education, however, this investigation is limited still further, in two directions. In descriptions of the content of education, arithmetic, geometry and algebra regularly appear alongside grammar, literature and rhetoric, and schooltext papyri frequently present mathematical exercises alongside copies of maxims, grammatical tables or paraphrases.¹⁴ I do not, however, deal with mathematics in what follows. This is mainly for practical reasons: with the mathematical material as well this book would have been unmanageably long. Leaving out the mathematical material does not vitiate discussion of the literary side, since, as I hope will become clear, literature, grammar and rhetoric were regarded as an integrated trio, while mathematics was a rather separate subject with its own internal relationships between arithmetic, algebra and geometry. Still, according to the evidence of both authors and

Greek or Coptic texts: alphabets (*P. Oxy.* x 1315, *P. Ant.* 1), a wordlist (*P. Oxy.* x1314), a possible grammatical table (Pack (2) 2997), a paraphrase (*PSI* 142) and one or two glossaries to Cicero and Virgil, which may not be in schoolhands (Gaebel (1969–70).

¹⁴ E.g. Boyaval (1975), Oellacher (1938), Parsons (1970).

Cambridge University Press

0521584663 - Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

Teresa Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

papyri, those who learned to read and write also learned to calculate: I ask the reader not to forget that side of the process during the rest of this book.¹⁵

The last respect in which I have restricted myself is the most problematic, though equally necessary to keep the project within manageable proportions. Those who learned to read and write embarked on a path of education which led, ultimately and for a few people, to oratory, philosophy, literary composition and scholarship. It is impossible to identify any definite point along this path when a pupil ceased to be a pupil and became a lifelong student, or when the practiser became a practitioner: by their nature these are disciplines in which one never ceases to learn, to seek advice as well as to give it. Nevertheless, I had to stop somewhere, and I have chosen a point well before what some readers might expect. I have not here discussed philosophy, partly because the literary sources often seem to exclude it from the 'common' education or *enkyklios paideia* which will be my main focus, and partly on the grounds that it is impossible to identify any surviving philosophical text as a 'schooltext' as distinct from a 'professional' philosophical text: indeed, in the case of philosophy, the distinction is probably meaningless.¹⁶ More controversially, I have little to say about the advanced rhetorical exercises, declamations, *controversiae* and *suasoriae*, despite the fact that they are widely attested as having been composed and delivered in schoolrooms.¹⁷ This is partly because the examples we have were composed by professionals, not by pupils in schools, but also because these exercises seem to have no counterparts among the schooltext papyri. This is not surprising: pupils who wanted to learn rhetoric seem typically to have moved to large towns and cities to do so, and these are places from which texts composed by pupils do not generally survive. My main interest in this study is those parts of

¹⁵ Mathematical schooltexts have been collected by D. H. Fowler (1988), Zalateo (1961).

¹⁶ We shall meet some philosophical texts, such as chreiai of Diogenes, being used for more elementary purposes.

¹⁷ Below, pp. 191ff.

Cambridge University Press

0521584663 - Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

Teresa Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

education for which we can compare the evidence of literary texts with that of the papyri.

In taking this approach I am somewhat out of line with past writers on the topic. Most previous monographs have taken ancient education as a whole, or at least the whole of Greek or Roman education, and dealt in the round with literacy, numeracy, physical and even professional training. This may be something to do with the nature of the subject: the history of education is a relatively 'young' topic, and most historical periods have attracted broad, sweeping portraits heavily reliant on a few vivid details to back up a general impression.¹⁸ In the last twenty years, however, the historiography of education has developed a great deal. In particular, it has been informed by educational sociology with its typically detailed studies, sophisticated use of statistics and socio-cultural agenda. The broad, anecdotal picture is no longer precise enough to answer questions such as who, exactly, was being taught, at whose instigation, for what diverse purposes, with what results and implications for a society and culture. Again, over the last twenty years, there has been much interest in the nature of literacy, in the ancient world and elsewhere.¹⁹ Studies of literacy, whether of levels of literacy in particular societies, the practical and symbolic functions of literacy or the cognitive implications of literacy and orality, have aroused fresh interest in literate education. Studies of education now have a number of precise and searching questions to answer. It is no longer sufficient to sketch comparisons between the Spartans and National Socialism, or British public schools, or to characterize Sappho as a prototype Dorothea Beale.²⁰ Complacent assumptions that the Athenians were more-or-less fellows of another college and that their educational aims were probably much the same as ours, will no longer do.²¹ In addition,

¹⁸ Beck (1964), Bonner (1977), M. L. Clarke (1971), Freeman (1907), Gwynn (1926).

¹⁹ Beard *et al.* (1991), W. V. Harris (1989), Youtie (1966), (1971a & b, 1975a & b), Maehler (1983), Samuel (1989) 55.

²⁰ Marrou (1975) 19–25, 33–5.

²¹ Attributed to a number of nineteenth-century Oxford dons. For some strikingly naive readings of Quintilian, in particular, see e.g. Bennett (1909) 64, J. Duff (1930) 407, Reinke (1975) 65, Rose (1949) 400.

Cambridge University Press

0521584663 - Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

Teresa Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CLASSICAL GREECE: THE BACKGROUND

independently of historiographical developments, there has appeared in the last half-century a steady stream of new educational papyri, which on their own would demand some reconsideration of traditional views of education. The time is ripe to re-examine Greek and Roman education.²²

What follows is intended as a contribution to the *nouvelle vague*: a study of one aspect of the complex of ancient educational ideas and institutions, based on that part of them associated with the acquisition of literacy, at the level at which it is widespread throughout the Graeco-Roman world. Taking the main components of literate education – the reading of literature, grammar and elementary rhetorical exercises – I shall try to establish what range of material was taught and what its usefulness might have been deemed to be to learners in so many different times and places, living in different social and cultural contexts and with widely diverse backgrounds and expectations. First, however, it is appropriate to explain the choice of the Hellenistic and Roman periods as the chronological boundaries of this study. We know as much about education in classical Athens, if not the rest of classical Greece, as anywhere, and Athenian education has been more influential and provoked more interest in later generations than that of any other time or place. A study of ancient literate education could hardly be complete without some discussion of the formative years of Greek *paideia*.

Classical Greece: the background

Fifth- and fourth-century Athens have by no means been overlooked in treatments of Graeco-Roman education. They appear in all the standard monograph treatments of Graeco-Roman education as a whole, and in a number of specific studies.²³ While most of the elements of later educational practice were developed in the classical period, however, what

²² The trend is already under way with studies such as Criatore (1996), W. V. Harris (1989), Kaster (1988), Robb (1994).

²³ E.g. Harvey (1966), R. Thomas (1989).

Cambridge University Press

0521584663 - Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

Teresa Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

little evidence we have gives no indication that they were assembled as a regular group or in a regular order until the early Hellenistic period. As I hope to show, the order (in every sense) of literate education is so important in the Hellenistic and Roman periods that we are justified in treating separately the earlier period when it was not in place.

The explosion of literacy, relatively speaking, and literate culture under the twin stimuli of the Athenian democracy and the Athenian empire are well known and documented.²⁴ The study of education, like most things about Athens, is made more difficult by the fact that our knowledge of Athenian culture is so rich in some ways, but so incomplete. It seems, however, that in the earlier fifth century there was no such thing as ‘education based on literacy’. The evidence indicates that literate education developed gradually in the second half of the century. In the old days, for instance, according to the character *Kreitton Logos* (‘Better Argument’) in the *Clouds*, the teaching of the *kitharistes* (lyre teacher) and gymnastics were enough for the young.²⁵ Nowadays, he complains, the lyre and gymnastics have been overtaken by the reading of Euripides. *Mousike* could refer to any art presided over by the Muses, including all kinds of poetry and other literature, playing, singing and dancing. We can be fairly sure that what

²⁴ Harvey (1966), R. Thomas (1989). Note, however, how little the sources make of the practical uses of education. Exceptions include the sausage-seller at Ar. *Eq.* 188–93, pressed to enter politics, who claims to have little *mousike*, barely his letters, and is told that he does not need *mousike* to run the state nowadays. We learn from this that letters are part of *mousike*, but not that one needs literacy, as opposed to *mousike* in general, to run, much less take any other part in, the democracy. Plato’s *Lysis* is portrayed writing letters and reading for his parents (*Lys.* 209b). Pl. *Leg.* recommends universal literacy. Xenophon implies that education has political implications in (*Lac.* 1.10) but he does not spell them out. At Xen. *Mem.* 4.2.9ff., Socrates teases Euthydemus for keeping a library of books and thinking himself learned, though he cannot learn virtue from books (on the growth of libraries in this period see Platthy (1968)). At *Oec.* 9.10 literacy is regarded as essential to (aristocratic) domestic management. For Aristotle in the *Politics*, *grammata* (letters), along with *graphike*, (drawing or drafting) are ‘useful for life’ (1337b23ff.); cf. 1338a16ff., where *grammata* are assessed as useful for household management, the rest of education and ‘all political affairs’.

²⁵ 889ff. ‘The old days’ is taken to refer to the Marathon generation. Sophists did not appear in Athens before c. 460 and later so it is unlikely that the ‘new education’ was perceived to make much impact until the 440s and perhaps not much negative impact until after the death of Pericles in 429.