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0521587360 - Literacy and Power in the Ancient World

Edited by Alan K. Bowman and Greg Woolf

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1 Literacy and power in the ancient world

Alan K. Bowman and Greg Woolf

Not every society has chosen to use literacy in the same way, but literacy is always connected with power.

R. Pattison, *On Literacy. The Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock*, p. viii

Why study writing? One possible answer is that the enormous growth, over the past quarter-century, of interest in writing and literacy is simply the latest manifestation of our own society's graphocentrism, our obsession with the written word. We believe that literacy enables us to achieve our full potentials, whether as individuals or as societies, and conversely that illiteracy is a root cause of personal failure and economic and political 'backwardness'. Written documents count for more with us than does speech, whether we are dealing with business contracts or academic publications. Viewed from that perspective, the interdisciplinary maelstrom of literacy studies that has generated not only a huge bibliography but also specialist conferences and seminars, journals and even a monograph series, is the ultimate self-reflexive academic discourse. Like most intellectual tempests, it might be thought to have reached classical studies only when it is almost blown out everywhere else, hence this collection.

Perhaps. But historians have a more pressing and pragmatic need to consider the ways in which texts were produced, circulated and read out in antiquity. Our understanding of the ancient world is overwhelmingly dependent on texts. Our use of these texts, whether they are literary or documentary, depends on the assumptions we make about how they were originally produced, read and understood. Before we use an inscribed decree of the Athenian assembly we need some idea of the reasons for which it was inscribed and set up, and ideally some notion of who could consult it and whether anyone in fact did. When we come across an archive of government documents we need to know whether the record itself or the act of recording was more important in asserting the power of those who wrote over those who were written about. Law-codes and laws can only tell us about society if we know whether they were intended for everyday use, or whether some rulers issued laws in order to show that they were rulers.

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These examples are all of documentary texts, but the same considerations apply to what are conventionally known as literary works. The differences are easy to exaggerate and several contributors to this collection set the production and circulation of 'literary' texts in similar social contexts to those discussed for documents. Roman officers and Christian leaders used letters in ways that were not dissimilar, and the life of Darius was circulated in literary form among his subjects as well as inscribed in the rock at Behistun for Ahura Mazda to read.

Writing was used in all these contexts to construct power in society. The kinds of power constructed varied widely from empires to groups united by a common set of texts, whether those texts were the Latin or Greek classics or Holy Scriptures. Exploring these relationships between power and literacy is the primary aim of all the papers in this collection. The variety of ways in which writing and power intersect is reflected in the diversity of contributors' approaches to the issue. Because this variety seems real, we do not intend in this introduction to advance some unifying thesis or synthesis, but simply to draw attention to some common themes that emerge from the papers and from the discussions they stimulated in the seminars and conference, held in Oxford in 1992, at which they were first presented.¹

Each contributor approached the issue of literacy and power from the standpoint of her or his own field of expertise, but most drew in addition for inspiration on work on literacy produced by historians and anthropologists of other periods and places. It is thus fair, as well as useful, to begin by setting these papers in the context of wider debates about literacy and writing. Reviewing recent writing about literacy, however, one has the strong impression that it has done more to dispel fictions than to establish general insights or principles. A number of excellent introductions to the subject now exist,² and it would be otiose to recapitulate them here, but the dominant theme of all of them is an account of what *cannot* be held to be generally true about literacy. This negative credo can be briefly summarised. Literacy is not a single phenomenon but a highly variable package of skills in using texts: it may or may not include writing as well as reading and is generally geared only to particular genres of texts, particular registers of language and often to only some of the languages

¹ We would like to acknowledge our debt in this chapter to Cyprian Broodbank, Patrick Wormald and all the participants in the seminars and at the conference; also to the participants in a conference on 'Documenting Cultures' organised by Roger Bagnall and Dirk Obbink at Columbia University, New York (October, 1992).

² Street (1984) is the best general introduction. Thomas (1992: 1–28) discusses the same issues with particular reference to the ancient world. For similar expressions cf. Larsen (1988), Baumann (1986: 1–22), Finnegan (1988: 1–14).

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used within multilingual societies. Moreover, literacy does not operate as an autonomous force in history, whether for change, progress and emancipation or for repression. Literacy does not of itself promote economic growth, rationality or social success. Literates do not necessarily behave or think differently from illiterates, and no Great Divide separates societies with writing from those without it. The invention of writing did not promote a social or intellectual revolution, and reports of the death of orality have been exaggerated.

Positively, many students of literacy have drawn the conclusion that the uses of writing need to be investigated society by society. Quite a number of very successful studies of this kind have now been carried out, both at book length and in collections of essays.³ Focusing on the uses of documents and writing has shed new light on aspects of social life from law to historical consciousness. We have become especially aware of the extent to which ethnocentric and anachronistic assumptions have been made about the ways writing was used in the past, or is used today in other societies. A number of studies have traced the development of modern and western views of writing, from their origins in the middle ages, and connections have been noted with Protestantism, European expansion, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.⁴

But if this research has revealed much about both particular historical societies and about modern graphocentrism, it has arguably revealed less about literacy in general. Many studies conclude by noting the damage they have inflicted on generalising models of literacy, but few attempt to establish new ones. Up to a point this insistence on the primacy of carefully nuanced case study over grand theory exemplifies broader trends in the humanities and social sciences. Social anthropologists and historians alike now insist that 'our people do/did things in their own way', while social evolution and world history have become minority interests. Studies of literacy are united not by common doctrines, but by common approaches and common rejection of the most extreme propositions about literacy.⁵ The original rejection of those generalisations was certainly justified. Many of the proposed correlations and consequences were empirically falsified as

³ Monographs: Clanchy (1979), Graff (1979), Cressy (1980), Scribner and Cole (1981); Furet and Ozouf (1982), Stock (1983), Thomas (1989), McKitterick (1989). Collections: Goody (1968), Resnick (1983), Baumann (1986), Gledhill, Bender and Larsen (1988: chs. 11–15), Schousboe and Larsen (1989), McKitterick (1990), Humphrey (1991). Numerous journal articles have also appeared on the subject. Graff (1981) is a useful collection of readings from earlier literature.

⁴ Graff (1979), Cressy (1980), Clanchy (1983), Thomas (1986) and especially Bloch (1989) and Harbsmeier (1989). Graff (1987) is a not wholly successful attempt to provide a synthesis.

⁵ Most commonly rejected are the views of Lévi-Strauss (1958: 347–60), Goody and Watt (1963), Havelock (1982) and Ong (1982). The later work of both Goody (1977, 1986, 1989) and Ong (1986) modifies their earlier positions to some degree.

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soon as a wider range of societies was considered, and to some extent the earliest work on literacy was naturally influenced by contemporary graphocentrism. But few continue to hold those positions, and arguably the reaction has gone too far, rejecting not just those strong views that verge on technological determinism, but also weaker versions that characterise writing as an enabling technology or as a necessary but not sufficient precondition for particular developments.⁶ Gunpowder, electricity and hypodermic syringes do not have single, predictable or identical impacts on every society, but these technologies are not infinitely malleable and few societies seem to have been able to evade the implications of their invention and wide availability for very long. One does not have to believe in technological determinism, in other words, to believe that some innovations might make a difference or even that the difference made by particular innovations might not be completely unpredictable. Likewise it should be possible to write accounts, and even histories of literacy in general, in which writing neither determines all, nor is wholly determined by, external factors.

But for the moment a better tactic may be to produce studies that bridge the gap between case studies and grand theory.⁷ This collection represents an attempt to find such a middle ground. Rather than trying to produce a complete account of literacy within a single society, we chose to concentrate on just one aspect of literacy over a broad geographical, historical and cultural range. Literacy and power seemed a central and important theme, but other choices would have been possible: the relationship of literacy and orality is another major issue which would reward further study,⁸ as would the relationship between writing and other symbolic media, particularly when texts are combined with other symbols on epigraphy, coins and monumental architecture. The ancient world seems to us less obviously a unity than some have thought,⁹ and it was partly for that reason that so many of the papers were commissioned to deal with its limits, with the confrontation of Greek and Latin literacies with those in other languages, from Iberian and Celtic to Syriac, and with other cultural traditions, from

⁶ Recent advocates of such a re-evaluation include Larsen (1988), Finnegan (1988: 159), and McKitterick (1990: 5) but a similar formulation was proposed by Gough (1968).

⁷ Finnegan (1988: 168) advocates a similar tactic.

⁸ Goody (1977, 1989) deals with the issue in general. Clanchy (1979) and Thomas (1989) look at individual societies. The potential of broader studies of the relationship of spoken to written culture in the ancient world is suggested by Desbordes (1990). Bloch (1989) illustrates the diversity of relationships possible.

⁹ On ancient literacy in general Harris (1989). On Greece Detienne (1988) and Thomas (1992), both including surveys of earlier bibliographies. On Rome Humphrey (1991) gathers responses to Harris's synthesis. Most of these studies restrict themselves to Greek and Latin literacy.

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Judaism to the ancient literate empires of Egypt and the Near East. The range of the studies gathered together here is thus vast; nevertheless a number of common themes do emerge, even if some long-term trends and major areas of difference can be identified.

One crucial determinant of our view of the uses to which writing was put is the archaeological factors which determine the survival of evidence from antiquity. Only a tiny proportion of the total volume of texts ever written has survived: literally less than a handful of individual military pay-records, for example, from a total production of about 225 million in the first three centuries AD.¹⁰ A century ago one would scarcely have guessed how radically the discovery of Greek papyri in Egypt would change the picture. The Vindolanda tablets described in Bowman's chapter provide another example, as do the Vesuvian cities, not just for the graffiti and electoral *programmata* painted on the walls of buildings, but also for finds like the private library of Greek philosophical texts from the Villa of the Papyri, and the Murecine tablets and the archive of Caecilius Iucundus which show the extent to which writing was used in everyday business deals and minor litigation by individuals well outside the civic élites.¹¹ Our knowledge of all these aspects of ancient literacy depends on a very small number of documentary archives: new evidence will alter the picture, and we do not know how many more unexploded bombs still exist.¹² Yet it perhaps remains legitimate to consider whether this is one case in which more than the usual weight should be given to the *argumentum e silentio* and there is perhaps something to be gained by comparing this issue to the debate over the degree to which the rural world was monetised.¹³

Ancient documents came in a wide variety of formats, genres and languages. Among the texts discussed by contributors to this volume are books, pamphlets, inscriptions, administrative documents and graffiti; yet this list is by no means exhaustive. The interaction between these different genres and literacies seems to have been considerable. The huge range of material discovered on the rubbish tip at Oxyrhynchus shows how a letter about obtaining books might emanate from a cultured circle, but when groups of texts can be related to particular houses or contexts, it is clear that a broad range of written material might exist in a relatively modest milieu. That is a conclusion that would fit the Egyptian picture as a whole and it has been reinforced by the nature of finds at Nag Hammadi, at

¹⁰ Fink (1971: 242). ¹¹ Franklin (1991) with references to other literature.

¹² For an example from a different period see Franklin (1985).

¹³ Howgego (1992). Hopkins (1991) discusses the relationships between the spread of writing, of coin use and of political power.

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Vindolanda, at Masada.¹⁴ Thompson and Heather both suggest that less obvious intertextualities also existed, for example between the records of tax-collectors and the literary works through which they were educated, and which were produced as a side effect of state-sponsored education systems. Even if writing was taught to serve mundane purposes, once learnt it might be used to create lead curse tablets to be thrown into the sacred spring, or an amulet with a Christian or pagan religious text. The interplay between these various uses of writing argues against the existence, in much of the ancient world, of segregated specialised literacies. Writing seems to have been a transferable technology and literates seem often to have been competent in creating and using a wide variety of texts.

Our common theme is the relationship between literacy and power. No single, all-sufficient concept of the nature and application of 'power' has been adopted for this collection, and in the treatments of various topics that follow, examples of the political and social, religious and cultural, psychological and physical aspects of power recur, in various combinations and with differing weight of emphasis. Yet at the most general level, two closely interrelated aspects of the relationship between writing and power are worth noting: power over texts and power exercised by means of their use.

Power over texts encompasses restrictions placed on writing, on access to and possession of texts, on the legitimate uses to which the written word might be put and, perhaps most importantly, restrictions on reading texts. In its most fundamental manifestation, this may mean that an élite or restricted group determines both the status of particular kinds of texts and also which people or bodies may use them to legitimise their behaviour. Invocation of such power is often explicit, but it is important to recognise it as implicit even in such apparently neutral and anodyne statements as that of the Canopus Decree that 'a public religious assembly shall be celebrated every year in the temple and throughout the whole country in honour of King Ptolemy and Queen Berenice, the Benefactor Gods, on the day when the star of Isis rises, *which the holy books consider to be the New Year*'.¹⁵

The most common justification for such manipulation is *religio* (in whatever guise it may appear) but there are other methods of restricting or extending access. We need to consider the effects of straightforward technological change, for example in the writing of reports *transversa*

¹⁴ Letter about books: *P. Oxy.* 17.2192. The archaeological records of the excavations at the village of Karanis in the Fayum allow particular groups of papyri and ostraka to be located in individual houses. For samples of the material in the Nag Hammadi Codices see Robinson (1977) and cf. Pagels (1979). Masada: Cotton and Geiger (1989).

¹⁵ *OGIS* 56, translated by Austin (1981: no. 222) (our emphasis).

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charta or in the introduction of the codex.¹⁶ Power can be wielded by changing either the way texts are written (both the scripts and formats employed), or the language they are written in. The restrictiveness of hieroglyph can be contrasted with strategies which extend the range of written texts and make them accessible to a wider public by manipulation of the linguistic medium. Political authorities might impose a system of education in a language alien to that of the subject population, or simply make it virtually impossible to manipulate political, social or economic institutions without acquiring literacy in the dominant language.¹⁷ Finally, power can be exercised simply by preventing circulation and availability of undesirable texts, as the Roman emperor Septimius Severus tried to do in Egypt: ‘therefore let no man through oracles, *that is by means of written documents* supposedly granted under divine influence, nor by means of the parade of images or suchlike charlatanry, pretend to know things beyond human ken and profess [to know] the obscurity of things to come, neither let any man put himself at the disposal of those who enquire about this or answer it in any way whatsoever’.¹⁸

When texts are available, the power of authors and exegetes to impose an ‘authorised’ reading is ranged against the power of readers to generate new interpretations. Conflicts over authority may also result in the creation of competing texts, like the ‘propagandist’ prophecies known as the Oracle of the Potter and the Oracle of the Lamb, which occur in both pro-Egyptian and pro-Greek versions. Accounts of the past are as susceptible to this sort of manipulation as are prophecies about the future. Contemporary power struggles may be reflected in texts which present themselves as historical, and which may subsequently have an important influence on historiographical traditions.¹⁹ Readers of Homer and Virgil are aware that the poet aims primarily to please his client rather than to document the past. But the literary reworking of the past to justify the present also has consequences for our reading of prose histories, like Livy’s account of early Rome.

The generation of new interpretations may be a matter of deliberate strategy. Cameron’s discussion of the compilation of *florilegia* to justify a position or as polemic against the opposition is a case in point. The recreation of ‘classical Greece’ in the context of the Roman empire of the mid-second century AD by the orators of the so-called ‘Second Sophistic’ is also a reinterpretation, and its perpetrators may well have been well aware of what they were doing.²⁰ A more elusive development can perhaps be seen

¹⁶ Suetonius, *Iul.* 56.6; the codex, Roberts and Skeat (1983) and the papers collected in Blanchard (1989).

¹⁷ Pattison (1982), quoted at the start of this chapter, argues that literacy should be defined in terms of mastery of and competence in those linguistic skills that empower individuals in this way. ¹⁸ Rea (1977) (our emphasis). ¹⁹ Koenen (1983, 1985).

²⁰ Bowie (1970) on the use of the past in rhetoric, but Elsner (1992) suggests that some of these

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in the so-called Acts of the Alexandrian Martyrs. Here we have a series of fictionalised accounts, based on documentary reports of proceedings, of hearings before Roman emperors in which the Alexandrian patriots were 'tried'. The historical settings range from the reign of Gaius to that of Commodus, and in the earlier accounts anti-semitism predominates while in the later the feeling is anti-Roman. Understanding the purpose and function of these documents may well depend on locating them in the context of the late second or early third century AD,²¹ when most of the extant copies seem to have been produced, also the period in which the earliest Christian martyr acts, which resemble them strikingly in form, were set.

The exercise of power through texts makes it essential to regulate their use, but literacy is not easy to control and texts have therefore often been at the heart of struggles for power: rival exegeses, book-burning, conflicts over legislation, censorship and the creation of vernacular literatures have often characterised such struggles. Decisions about what is and what is not acceptable are exemplified just as well by minor philosophical disputes as by the formation of the Canon of the New Testament. Censorship may be exercised overtly by doctoring texts or more insidiously by dictating fashion and taste.²²

Power exercised *over* texts allows power to be exercised *through* texts. We might distinguish the use of texts to legitimise deeds and spoken words, from the uses to which writing may be put in law, bureaucracy, accountancy, census and population control. The legitimisation of the present through (re)interpretation of an often unknowable past is one aspect of the former (as the examples of the 'Augustan' view of Rome and the Second Sophistic, cited above, illustrate). In different ways the Behistun inscription, the *Monumentum Ancyranum* and the *Lex de imperio Vespasiani* all operated to legitimise the power of the rulers who set them up. Monumental and visible texts are not a *sine qua non* for the exercise of power, of course, just as, alongside the written codification of law, there may legitimately exist the notion of a valid but unwritten law. What the text says may, in any case, not be the whole, or even the primary, point if most people could either not see the writing or could not read it anyway. Monumental texts may exercise power through their location in space and the way they look. A particular layout might be associated with a particular political system, and the practice of *damnatio memoriae*, in which the physical obliteration of the name of a Roman emperor from inscriptions

texts may also have functioned to help Greeks establish an identity for themselves under Roman rule. ²¹ Musurillo (1954).

²² Philosophical disputes: e.g. *P. Oxy.* 42.3008. Censorship: e.g. *P. Oxy.* 47.3331.

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was accompanied by the destruction or replacement of statues and other images of him, illustrates how the texts on monuments might be organically associated with iconographic representation.

Power relations sometimes shaped the ways in which writing was used, as is shown by Woolf's study of pre-Roman and Roman Gaul and by Heather's analysis of the emergence of the successor states in Gaul and the rest of the sub-Roman West. But sometimes the uses to which writing was put redefined or helped to redefine those relations, as Lane Fox suggests was the case in the history of early Christianity. We cannot now trace the process by which the tradition about the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth evolved into written form, but the much later compilation of anecdotes and *apophthegmata* which illustrate the lives and deeds of the desert fathers of later antiquity may be analogous in suggesting relationships between the charismatic power generated by deeds and spoken words and its institutionalisation in holy texts, which were easier for religious authorities to control.²³

Political systems made very varied uses of writing, as is illustrated by the contributions of Thomas, Lewis, Bowman and Kelly. Not all ancient regimes used writing to establish complex bureaucracies, and often the fact that something was written down may have been as important as what it said. Nevertheless, a major preoccupation of modern scholarship has been the relationship between literacy and power in the context of the state and its organisation. There is a clear sense that literacy helps the state to cohere politically but not just because it enables the description of reality or the transmission of information in written form. Nor is it invariably the case that the most powerful and coherent states are those which make more use of literacy and writing. Even when good exemplars are close at hand a state may choose a less literate mode, as Woolf argues may have been the case in Gaul or as Thomas shows happened in Sparta. Alternatively, institutional change may entail changes in the degree of use, prominence or circulation of particular kinds of written material. The fact that we have virtually no imperial letters or edicts on papyrus from Byzantine Egypt at a period when, as Kelly shows, bureaucratic activity at the centre of the eastern empire was at a high level may reflect the nature of authority and the use of certain kinds of documentation (unless it is the product of the randomness of survival). If we think that this can be ascribed to a change of 'need', we must define need in symbolic as well as in functional terms.

Many uses of writing have a degree of symbolism; not simply the obviously monumental, but also the use of different materials for different kinds of texts or to create a psychological effect.²⁴ Layout and appearance are important in both public and private contexts. Ray shows how greater

²³ Translations by Ward (1975), Ward and Russell (1980).

²⁴ Materials: Tomlin (1988), Thomas (1992: 82–4). Psychological effect: *Hist. Aug., Hadr.* 7.6.

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literacy and a wider use of writing might be promoted, either deliberately or incidentally, by the power-wielding authority, which could introduce or adapt the technological or linguistic tools available. The spread is not necessarily uni-directional from the public into the private sector. Both Thomas and Bowman argue that an increase in the official public use of writing might be stimulated by private practices.

The use of writing by the state as an instrument of organisation requires close attention to the nature of bureaucracy. It consists of more than simply the use of pen and paper. There is a common presumption that bureaucracy develops a mode of its own which can be identified in a variety of features, linguistic style and character of handwriting to name but two. The power of the bureaucracy is easily perceptible and very marked in some periods and we must ask whether and how that power is controlled. Kelly argues that, paradoxically, the overt signs of antipathy between ruler and bureaucrat mask a mutual reinforcement and they remind us of what modern politicians sometimes say about civil servants. But we must also consider the connections between the use of writing and a concern for accountability and redress for those controlled by the bureaucracy, against the role of precedent and the tendency of codification to restrict innovation and reinforce the autonomy of the institution. Put more simply, how effective was the *graphe paranomon* or a petition to a Roman emperor likely to be? Why did an illiterate peasant-farmer think it worth preserving his papers even when he could not read them himself?²⁵

The existence of bureaucratic habits creates a bureaucratic élite, and considerable attention is paid by both Lewis and Goodman to the nature of 'scribal classes'. Most historians would now accept that the Roman imperial freedmen of the early principate did not derive their power simply from their bureaucratic functions. In the administrative context of the Greek world and the Roman East, the title and position of *grammateus* often did not simply describe a function but a position with some status and power. In the Achaemenid empire the 'scribal class' consisted of more than just scribes. This will contrast with Judaea where, it is argued, the power of the scribes did derive precisely from what they wrote. The very notion of a 'scribal class' implies a restrictive view of the application of writing and literacy, yet much of what follows tends to suggest that literacy is not a constricting discipline. No simple generalisation will cover all cases but there can be no doubt that, in all of the contexts discussed in the following chapters, we should beware of veering erratically between the view of a literate élite narrowly defined by the limited spread of writing skills and any unrealistic notion of a broad, popular literacy in the ancient world.

²⁵ Boak and Youtie (1960).