

CHAPTER I

Introduction

What This Book Is About

Flavius Cerialis was the prefect of the Ninth Cohort of Batavians at the fortress of Vindolanda, in northern Britain, in the late 90s and early 100s AD. He was probably a Batavian noble, and necessarily of equestrian rank. We have some texts probably written in his own hand, including a draft of a letter (Tab. Vindol. 225), of which Adams (1995: 129) has observed that '[i]ts orthography is consistently correct, and it has two types of old-fashioned spelling (the etymologically correct *-ss-* in *occassio*, twice, and *saluom*)'. On the basis of this and other evidence, he concludes that Cerialis' father was probably made a Roman citizen for loyalty to Rome and that Cerialis received a formal education in upper-class Roman literary culture.

But 'old-fashioned' spelling is by no means restricted to texts written by the highly educated upper class.¹ As Adams notes (1995: 130–1), examples can also be found in the writing of the scribes of Vindolanda, showing that education received by these professionals, whose spelling is generally highly standard, had apparently included such features. And in fact, even in a text whose spelling is aberrant enough to give 'support to the idea that [the writer] may have been a civilian trader without access to military scribes' (Adams 1995: 130–1, on Tab. Vindol. 343, letter from Octavius), there is evidence that this writer too had been taught to use 'old-fashioned' spellings (although not always correctly).

It turns out that Octavius is by no means the only writer who combines substandard and 'old-fashioned' spelling: we will see examples from, among other places and times, first century AD

¹ On the problems of defining 'old-fashioned' spelling (and the reasons for the scare quotes around the term), see pp. 10–15.

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Pompeii, second century AD Egypt and fourth century AD Britain. This – along with other types of what I shall call ‘optional’ spelling features – provides a unique, and unexpected, insight into the kind of education that was received by those who did not belong to the highest stratum of society, predominantly in the first to fourth centuries AD.² As will be discussed below, our direct access to knowledge about sub-elite education, in the form of information provided by ancient authors, is very limited. Consequently, if we want to find out about this important question in the study of Roman society, we must take indirect approaches.³

By ‘optional’ spellings I mean those which were available for writers educated in the standard orthography of the day to use (and were hence not considered incorrect), but whose absence would not have led the educated to consider their writer to be un- or under-educated. In addition, they are non-intuitive, that is they will not be produced by a writer who has simply learned a basic mapping of individual letters to sounds.

In this book I will consider two categories of optional spelling: ‘old-fashioned’ features (on the definition of which see pp. 10–15) and diacritics used to mark vowels and glides in the form of the *apex* and *i-longa*. To do this, I use a range of corpora whose writers can be assumed, in the main, to belong to the sub-elite, even though certain of the texts in some of them may have been written by those who belong to the higher echelons of society (e.g. the equestrian prefect Cerialis at Vindolanda); as far as our knowledge allows, I will take the background of the writers

² The problem of the date of the start and finish of the imperial period is of course a long-standing one. I have chosen to focus on the first to fourth centuries partly because this is the date range that the corpora I will be examining mainly come from – although some, such as the curses and the letters, also include a few texts from a little earlier or a little later (for the corpora, see pp. 26–36) – and partly because it is difficult to distinguish between texts in the fifth century before and after the traditional date for the fall of the (western) Roman empire of 476. An argument could be made for starting either at the beginning of the Augustan period in 31 BC or, perhaps more plausibly, its end in AD 14, especially since Augustus’ reign seems to have acted as something of an inflection point in the switch from many ‘old’ to ‘new’ orthographic features. Where it seems particularly relevant – for instance in the discussion of <uo> for /wu/ and /k^wu/ on pp. 109–28 – I have used the Augustan period as a dividing point. But, again, it is not always easy to distinguish between ‘first century’ (BC or AD) texts and ‘Augustan’ texts, so on the whole I have gone for the more straightforward definition of my period by centuries.

³ A good example of this, though taking account of a different type of data, is Morgan (1998).

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into account. In addition to this primary purpose, a secondary, but not unimportant, aim is to contribute to the understanding of the development of Roman orthography – and in some cases also sound change – more generally, in order to be useful for both epigraphists and linguists.

Sub-elite Education in Literacy

The question of the extent and type of literacy in the ancient world is a perennial one and is difficult to answer. Harris (1989: 259–73) estimates levels of literacy under the Roman empire to be no greater than 15% in Italy and 5–10% of the population in the Western provinces. These figures are problematic in a number of ways and are really only ‘guesstimates’. More important is his emphasis on the great variation in literacy across the empire, which was affected by a large number of factors, including social class (including slave vs free), wealth, occupation, gender, geography (e.g. location in the empire, rural vs urban, local infrastructure), linguistic background and many others.⁴

There is also the issue of how to define literacy, which is hard enough to establish in the modern day: clearly most male members of the elite had received an education which rendered them capable of reading and writing highly complex literary works, but on the evidence available to us it is often difficult to know whether, for example, a craftsman who could write his name could do only this or much more. However, what is clear is that literacy, while not wide, could be deep, in the sense that certain members of the sub-elite were often literate and could read and write to a fairly high level. We have plenty of evidence for slaves of the elite acting as secretaries and reading-machines for their masters, for instance, but there are many other occupations, both among slave and (sub-elite) free, where literacy is attested or implied, and the written word was pervasive, even if it was not a great impediment to be illiterate (Harris 1989: 196–233; Willi 2021: 14–19). For example, the majority of those carrying out business with the financier family of the Sulpicii in Puteoli, and in the similar tablets from

⁴ See also the chapters regarding the Roman empire in Kolb (2016).

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Herculaneum (on which, see pp. 28–31), were literate, since they were able to write out a contract in their own hand (about a fifth of these *chirographa* were written by someone else; Camodeca 2017b: 24). Both they and the scribes who wrote the rest of these documents achieved a largely standard orthography (for some exceptions, see p. 262).

However, what is lacking is much evidence for the educational system by which those in the sub-elite learnt to read and write. Bloomer (2013: 451), for example, tells us:

[T]he Roman boy or girl of the first century CE came to grammar school about the age of seven, already knowing the alphabet. Reading, writing, and arithmetic were learned here. The child would learn to write and then read Greek; Latin followed. After basic literacy (including memorization and recitation) the child learned grammar, mythology, and literary criticism all together while reading a poetic text and listening to the teacher's exposition. A set of exercises from aphorism to fable and description, themselves increasingly complex narrative building blocks, led to the finished speech. At the final stage of declamation, the advanced boy learned a system of composition and delivery of mock deliberative and legal speeches.

What Bloomer does not specify is that this describes the educational career of a child who was a member of the elite. Works by writers like Quintilian, on whom Bloomer is leaning here, were written by the elite for the elite; they were not interested in describing the education of the sub-elite: as Sigismund-Nielsen (2013: 289) says, '[w]e meet freeborn children from the lower classes very infrequently in our sources. They were simply not interesting enough'.⁵

Nonetheless, as we have established, it is clear that literate education could be available to the sub-elite (see also Mullen and Bowman 2021: 61). Slaves could be taught in a *paedagogium* in their owner's villa; slaves of the imperial household were taught

⁵ Although Apuleius (*Metamorphoses* 9, 17) represents the wife of a baker as having been the fellow-pupil of the well-born wife of a town councillor. The colloquia of the *Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana* (edited and translated by Dickey 2012–15) provide a number of vignettes of children attending school, but, as far as one can tell, they seem to have belonged to relatively wealthy families (the families own slaves, including nurses and *paedagogi*; one child owns a number of books, and has a father who is a magistrate – and of course they could pay school fees); for helpful discussion of these passages, see also Dickey (2017: 7–47).

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in the Paedagogium on the Palatine – presumably often to a high level (Sigismund-Nielsen 2013: 296; although note the scepticism of Harris 1989: 247–8). Scribes, whose work will form much of the data used in this study, clearly were educated in some fashion – and, as I shall show, in a fashion that in some respects at least was different from that of non-scribes – but we know very little about how they were trained (Morgan 1998: 32).

Likewise, there appears to have been some literacy education that took place in the army, perhaps for scribal purposes (see pp. 273–6), perhaps for soldiers more generally;⁶ the tendency for letters written from and to Vindolanda to end with a greeting in a different hand from that which writes most of the letter suggests that some level of literacy among non-scribes was not uncommon. Harris (1989: 253–5) suggests that literacy was much higher among legionaries than auxiliaries, but at least some auxiliaries could write, as demonstrated by the letters of Chrauttius from Vindolanda (Tab. Vindol. 264 and 310). Chrauttius will have been a Batavian or Tungrian auxiliary, and probably learnt a non-standard version of Latin in the army, perhaps showing some influence from his first language (Adams 1995: 129–30), but is capable of writing a greeting formula.

Similarly, Bowman and Thomas (1994: 74) suggest that the military reports with the heading ‘*renuntium*’ were written by the *optiones* making the report themselves, on the basis of the different hands of the writers. Adams (1995: 102–3) has argued that the appearance of *debunt* ‘they ought’ in place of standard *debent* suggests that the exemplar on which these reports are based was also written by a non-scribe (perhaps also one of the *optiones*). He observes that this provides evidence of different degrees of education among the writers at Vindolanda: ‘[t]he *renuntia* thus give us an intriguing glimpse of a social class (probably that of the *optiones*) who regularly used the substandard form *debunt*, yet were *literate*’ (Adams 1995: 131; emphasis in the original).

⁶ On the importance of writing and written documents in the army, see Speidel (1996: 57–64).

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Further evidence of education at Vindolanda comes from lines of Virgil, possibly Catullus, and pseudo-Virgil (Tab. Vindol. 118, 119, 854 and 856), which were presumably produced for writing practice, although the ‘literary’ hands used are different from the usual scribal scripts. The editors suggest that 118 may have been the output of children of the prefect Flavius Cerialis, although there is no evidence of such a connection for 854 and 856.⁷

It might be assumed that the education undergone by sub-elite members of society largely followed the same pattern as that described by Bloomer above, except that education stopped at some earlier point in the process – exactly at which stage might depend on the resources and aims of the child’s parents, on what teaching was available or other factors. To some extent, this is probably true; in the context of learning Greek in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, Morgan (1998: 56–7) finds that papyri and other writing materials containing learning exercises and school texts have a different geographical distribution, with letters and alphabets widely scattered, including in villages, as are wordlists and literature, while scholia, rhetorical exercises and grammatical texts are far more restricted, especially to more urban areas:⁸ she concludes, ‘[i]t looks rather as though the number of people in Upper Egypt whose education progressed as far as learning grammar and rhetoric was a very small proportion of those who acquired some basic literacy and read some literature’ (Morgan 1998: 57).

However, we should be careful of making too many assumptions along these lines: even if we assume the Egyptian situation is representative of learning elsewhere in the empire, we can seldom identify any clues about the social background of those using these materials, so it is possible that they still largely reflect the education of a fairly small elite.⁹ Moreover, Morgan (1998: 67–73) has emphasised, again on the basis of the Egyptian Greek material, that the process by which children were educated was less

⁷ On literacy and education in the army elsewhere, see Speidel (2016: 188–9) and Stauner (2016: 800, 805–8).

⁸ Syllabaries, surprisingly, are less widely distributed.

⁹ Although Morgan (1998: 139–41) suggests that the focus on accepting one’s lot found in gnomic sayings in schooltext papyri may reflect their aim at sub-elite learners.

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a curriculum whereby everyone studied the same thing, but some people dropped out earlier than others, but rather a system involving certain ‘core’ exercises and texts, and a much wider ‘periphery’ whose contents were heterogeneous and depended on the choice of the teacher (and presumably other factors, such as access to texts). Morgan includes in the ‘core’ the kind of basic literate education that to some extent this book focusses on:

[e]verybody, so far as we can see, learned to read and write through reading and writing letters, alphabets and words, though syllabaries may not have been so popular. It is plausible to suppose that everyone read and copied gnomic sayings . . . It seems likely that Homer was very widely read, at least up to the end of the Roman period. Beyond these, what our survivals represent is less a curriculum than a free-for-all. (Morgan 1998: 70)

It makes sense that learning to read and write should be at the core for everyone, since very basic literacy is perhaps open to less variation than other types of education.¹⁰ But the periphery might have been very different from what Morgan finds in Egypt, depending on the kind of use that literacy was to be put to. For example, shorthand, which is used in a number of texts at Vindolanda (Tab. Vindol. 122–6), was presumably not part of the standard educational system but was a speciality of those who were being educated as scribes or secretaries. And even at the level of the core, some variation existed: as already noted, syllabaries seem to be used less than other learning materials, in Egypt at least. And Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria* 1.1.26–32) mentions various approaches to learning to read and write of which he approves (ivory letter shapes to play with) or disapproves (learning the names and order of the letters before their shape; putting off the most difficult syllables; haste in moving on to pronouncing words and sentences).

As we shall see, there might also be variation as to what spellings a teacher might favour: they could be conservative or innovatory. The teachers themselves might also be of higher or lower literacy levels, have access to more or fewer resources, or even make

¹⁰ Although the debate surrounding ‘phonics’ vs ‘whole language’ approaches to learning to read English in modern societies (Hempenstall 2005) suggests that this is not as straightforward as it may appear.

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greater or lesser effort. It is not unreasonable to suppose that, on the whole, the cheaper the teacher, the less they might have to impart and the less enthusiasm they might have to impart it. The contexts in which literate education took place might also have varied significantly; both ancient and modern discussions assume that it is children who are learning to read and write, but again, the Vindolanda tablets might provide an exception, if we assume that soldiers like Chrauttius learned to write only in the army, and hence presumably as adults. Another example of learning taking place after childhood comes from the tablets of the Sulpicii of Puteoli, where the Claudian letter \mathfrak{A} in place of $\langle u \rangle$ for /w/ is found in TPSulp. 5 (by a scribe), 27 (non-scribe), 32 (scribe), 48 (both scribe and non-scribe), 77 (non-scribe) and 101 (scribe), mostly in the names of the consuls *Vitellius* and *Vipstanus*, but once in *uenalium* ‘for sale’ (77) and once in *uadimonium* (5). All of these tablets are from AD 48 (apart from 5, which is undated) and reflect the introduction of the Emperor Claudius’ new letters (on which, see Oliver 1949). Clearly, some scribes and non-scribes alike had heard about and adopted this new letter, at least for the formal context of consular dating. Scribes in the army and elsewhere might also have received additional training, on top of whatever literacy skills they arrived with. And much of this assumes some kind of formal education, with a paid teacher: some may have learnt informally, from their parents, friends or peers, in which case the process might have been quite different, and presumably less systematic.

It does seem likely that scribes must have received some kind of education for their role. The fact that the spelling of the scribes in the tablets from Pompeii, Herculaneum and Vindolanda contains so few substandard features in itself implies a certain degree of homogenisation amongst these groups, which might be due to specific education (perhaps in the form of top-up training). However, it is also possible that people who became scribes were more likely to have already received a high-quality education in standard spelling. As we shall see, the enquiries in Parts I and II will reveal other ways in which scribes show homogenisation in spelling that implies a process of education specifically for scribes.

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As important as the question of what was taught, and how, in different contexts is how well it is taught (or, since teaching is at least a two-person process, learnt). That is, the difference in educational content when it comes to spelling might not be very great between those who are well taught and those who are badly taught; the major difference might be their ability to use what they have been taught consistently according to the canons of the elite standard. For example, two writers may both have learnt that the digraph <ae> is used to spell certain words which contain the vowel /ɛ:/; one of them consistently remembers which words contain <ae>, while the other remembers only some words or only remembers some of the time, and the rest of the time uses <e>, or hypercorrects by using <ae> in words for which the standard spelling requires <e>. In this case, the two writers have received the same educational content (existence and use of <ae>) but not the same quality of education. One could imagine yet another writer whose education has been so basic that they were simply taught the names and values of the individual letters corresponding to the sounds in their idiolect; this writer would therefore never have learnt the existence of <ae> and will always write <e> for /ɛ:/.¹¹ Here this has been a difference in content as well as quality.

This distinction allows us to be more precise in our examination of whether the content of the orthographic education which was received by elite or sub-elite, or standard and non-standard spellers, was much the same, or not. If it was not, ‘old-fashioned’ or otherwise non-intuitive features such as *apices* and *i-longa* will appear only in the writing of elite or standard spellers; if it was, we should expect to find old-fashioned spellings in both elite and sub-elite writings, by both standard and substandard

¹¹ A possible example of someone whose education may have been of this type is N. Blaesus Fructio, whose *chirographum* in the tablets of Caecilius Jucundus from Pompeii (CIL 4.3340.26) contains a remarkable number of spellings which must reflect his pronunciation in a span of 17 words or parts of words: <e> for /aɛ/ (*B]lesius* for *Blaesius*, *Cecilio* for *Caeciliō*), raising of /ɛ/ before another vowel (*Thrasia* for *Thrasea*), single /l/ in *milia* for *millia*, loss (or assimilation?) of /k/ before /t/ (*oto]gentos* for *octōgentōs*, *autione* for *auctiōne*, *fata* for *facta*), loss of nasals before stops (*Iucudo* for *Iucundō*, *Popeis* for *Pompeīs*), lack of word-final nasals and epenthesis in /gn/ clusters (*si]genataru* for *signātārum*). The only instances where the spelling is non-intuitive is in his own name *Fructio* and, apparently, the final letter of *actu]m*.

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spellers: any differences in the orthography of these categories will then be ones of consistency or correctness, reflecting quality of education rather than content.

Defining ‘Old-fashioned’ Spelling

A good example of the complicated issues involved in identifying ‘old-fashioned’ spellings is the letter of Suneros (CEL 10), from Oxyrhynchus, dated to the Augustan period. We find the following features:

- <ei> for /i/ < /i:/ by iambic shortening in *tibei* for *tibi* ‘to you’, and for /i/ in *uocareis* for *uocāris* ‘you will have called’ (in error, since the /i/ in the final syllable was never long, but presumably due to confusion with the perfect subjunctive *uocārīs*).
- <e> for /i:/ (*deuom* for *dīuum* ‘of the gods’).
- <xs> for <x>: *adduxsit* for *addūxit* ‘(s)he brought’, *Oxysrychitem* for *Oxyrhynchitem*, *maxsuma* for *maxima* ‘greatest’.
- <u> for /i/ before a labial: *maxsuma* for *maxima* ‘greatest’.
- <q> for /k/ before <u>: *qum* for *cum* ‘when’.
- <uo> for /wu/: *uolt* for *uult* ‘wants’, *deuom* for *dīuum* ‘of the gods’.

The editor Cugusi describes <ei> as a ‘sign of antiquity’ (‘segno di antichità’) and <uo> in *uolt* as an ‘archaising spelling’ (‘grafia archaizzante’) but for *deuom* notes that the ending ‘-om continued in use more or less to the end of the Republic’ (‘-om ci porta pressappoco alla fine della Repubblica’), describes <q> as ‘probably already in this period a “scholarly” spelling’ (‘probabilmente già in questo periodo grafia “scolastica”’), does not consider <xs> old-fashioned, and does not comment on <u> in *maxsuma*. He sees <e> in *deuom* as due to a confusion between /e:/ and /i:/ found in inscriptions (for slightly more clarity here, see also Cugusi 1973: 667). Adams (2016: 208–9) says that Suneros ‘uses the old spelling *tibei*, and *deuom* is archaising on two counts.¹² *Vocareis* is a false use of orthographic archaism’. However, on the whole he takes a nuanced approach, emphasising that use of <u> continued

¹² Presumably use of <e> and <uo>, although elsewhere in his commentary on this letter he does not actually mention the <uo> spelling. But since he is explicitly talking about orthography here, I do not imagine that he means the genitive plural in -om rather than -ōrum as one of the counts.