

Literacy, Rome and provinces

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INTRODUCTION

Literacy is conventionally defined as the ability to read and write. There are various forms of literacy depending on people's membership in a particular culture. We need to distinguish between active and passive literacy: starting with the ability to decipher or write simple texts, to the creative composition of complex texts with the complex syntax which may also imply forms of critical thinking and a reflection of one's self. Literacy may depend on people's status, their profession, gender, and age-group, and their access to education. It may be limited to elites, professional scribes, traders, or soldiers, but writing seems to have become increasingly necessary for the functioning of the Roman Empire. Writing can not only be used for legal, religious, economic, and political purposes, but also for private correspondence, drama, and literature, though it may also have a symbolic/religious role. To the individual and society, the spread of literacy may reflect far-reaching changes in Italy and across the Roman Empire, fundamentally transforming political, social, and economic structures and cognitive processes. We therefore need to not only consider the creation, dissemination, and evolution of both Roman and indigenous writing systems, but also their changing role and social impact (cf. Goody 1986).

EARLY FORMS OF LITERACY

There are various writing systems in Italy from the seventh to the first century BCE whose developments reveal the diverse identities and sociopolitical developments in Italy during the republic. Down to about the third century BCE, writing mainly served to perpetuate elite status. Besides texts of a ritual and funerary

nature and the ever-present markers of ownership, commercial activities are among the earliest motors of literacy (e.g., graffiti in "emporia" like Genoa or Pech Maho), while monumental inscriptions in stone are a comparatively late development.

Besides the Greek alphabet in Magna Graecia, the Etruscan alphabet dominated in Italy from ca. 700 BCE: the ca. 13,000 attestations are largely limited to funerary and ritual texts, which mainly relate to the aristocracy. Etruscan writing is attested down to the Augustan period. From the Etruscan alphabet derive – directly or indirectly – many local alphabets in Italy, among them the Latin alphabet (seventh century BCE). Writing in Rome was originally largely restricted to official documents regarding religion, administration, politics, and law. Earliest texts include the Duenos inscription on a *kernos* (early sixth century) and the *boustrophedon* written on the Lapis Niger (ILS 4913, fifth century). The evolution and diversification of Roman literacies (third–first century) appears as prelude for its adoption by other peoples.

Other derivatives of the Etruscan alphabet are Oscan, Umbrian, Venetic, and Lepontic. Oscan is first attested in the fifth century BCE. It was used for complex religious and legal texts (e.g., *lex tabulae Bantinae*; *cippus Abellanus*, ca. 100 BCE) and coin legends, notably the *víteliú/Italia* coins during the Social War. An Osco-Latin bilingual graffito on a tile reveals the literacy of two slaves from Pietrabbondante. Oscan was still employed in the first century CE, notably for graffiti at Pompeii. Umbrian is closely related to Oscan: the longest text, consisting of seven bronze tablets from *Iguvium/Gubbio* (Iguvine tablets), is of a religious nature, using both Umbrian and Latin (third to first century BCE). The Lepontic (or Lugano) alphabet was a seventh to sixth-century BCE adaptation for the Celtic language in northern Italy (Como/Lago Maggiore). Most of the approximately three hundred texts from the seventh–fifth century are short graffiti. But after the Roman conquest, more

complex Lepontic texts developed. On the Cisalpine Padane drachma, the original Greek coin legend *Massa(lia)* had degenerated into some indecipherable vertical strokes by the second century BCE, suggesting that the engraver and the audience were illiterate, but from ca. 100 BCE the local elites must have reached a level of literacy that made it feasible to develop new coin legends in Lepontic. In northeastern Italy, Venetic inscriptions (late seventh to early first century BCE) show enormous regionalization of literacy, especially between northern Veneto and the urbanized south: for example, writing is largely limited to the votive sphere and to a male context in the north, while in the town of Este, women are associated with 50 percent of all funerary and votive inscriptions. The continued evolution of indigenous writing systems suggests that Roman imperialism must have created an important stimulus for literacy in Italy in the Late Republic. Also, for many people BILINGUALISM must have been the norm (e.g., important Celto-Latin bilingual inscriptions from Vercelli and Todi).

Outside Italy, pre-Roman writing systems generally survived down to the first century BCE, while indigenous languages persisted well into the Principate, occasionally revealed in epigraphic testimonies. In Iberia, we find Iberic, Celtiberic, Tartessian, Lusitanian, Greek, and Punic epigraphies. The earliest evidence for writing dates to the eighth century BCE (Phoenician and Tartessian inscriptions). Regarding the end of the indigenous forms of writing, the latest Lusitanian inscriptions are usually dated to the early Principate (first to second century CE). Iberic was also used in western Languedoc, for example, 350 graffiti in the Iberic alphabet from the Iron Age *oppidum* Ensérune. In southern Gaul, the Greek alphabet was used to write a Celtic language. From the second century BCE, we can recognize a spread of Gallo-Greek epigraphy: besides markers of property on potsherds, the texts became more complex and the range of document types more varied (graffiti, funerary steles, dedications, monetary legends), though still largely limited to the local aristocracy.

Though interaction with Rome might have catalyzed the use of writing in many societies, the result is substantially different from the epigraphic culture of the Principate. Besides the increasing need for a *lingua franca*, the adoption of Latin language and alphabet is a sign of an educated elite and their *Selbstdarstellung*, made possible by new forms of Latin literature in Rome since the Augustan period. This reflects new forms of literacy, while pre-Roman writing was largely limited to a small elite and to commercial, funerary, religious, and magical texts, and coin legends.

LITERACY IN THE PRINCIPATE

With the expansion of Roman power it seems that writing was stimulated across Italy and the Roman West, becoming a social necessity for many people involved in administration, army, and trade, as well as a status symbol associated with concepts of *paideia* and *humanitas*, and the aspirations of local elites. The Roman “information society” was mainly concerned with law, army, and administration: Egyptian papyri and VINDOLANDA TABLETS, for example, reveal aspects of archiving and retrieving information. Across the empire many people were confronted with written texts: for instance, first-century BCE bronze tablets from Este and Veleia (*Roman Statues* I no. 16, 28–30) indicate how conquered peoples were integrated into a legal discourse. Similarly, the *sententia Minuciorum* (117 BCE, *CIL* V 7749) shows that even small-scale societies in the Ligurian Apennines, still embedded in “Celto-Ligurian” traditions, had to become accustomed to the importance of writing and the rule of legal texts. The importance of legal texts in the Roman Empire may also help to explain the ubiquity of seal boxes (i.e., seals for stylus tablets) in urban, military, and many rural sites in the Principate.

In a minimal view of literacy, Harris (1989) limits writing largely to the more privileged strata of society in the first-third century CE (10 percent). An important issue is education,

which was largely restricted to the wealthy and privileged, with rhetoric and *paideia* being indicators of status. But even in a rural provincial context we find, for example, graffiti by children, like a dialogue between *grammaticus* and pupil from the villa of Ahrweiler; a Greek palindrome from a wall painting in the villa of Contigny (Lausanne), or Vergilian tags painted on the plaster of a villa at Otford (Kent). Lines from the *Aeneid* among the Vindolanda ink tablets and the poems of centurions from Bu Njem (Tripolitania) hint at the availability of education in a military context.

It is difficult to assess the degree of literacy and illiteracy in the Roman Empire, since most written documents have not survived. Monumental stone inscriptions are obviously not a good indicator, as they do not correlate directly with the ability to read and write: their production and preservation depends on the availability of appropriate materials; they also reflect the “epigraphic habit” (MacMullen 1982), usually deriving from a public and mainly urban context, mirroring the self-identity of elites, their freedmen, and their slaves. They are also very formulaic; only rarely do they provide an insight into people’s literacy.

This is why we need to take into account graffiti, writing tablets, and *instrumentum domesticum* on bronze, wood, lead, papyrus, and ostraca, which altogether show an impressive diversity of evidence for writing. Vindolanda writing tablets or *paypyri* from Fayyum villages, for example, show that writing was used by people at a much lower social level. With the Principate, the need for long-distance communication, both public and private (e.g., letters of Egyptian soldiers stationed in Italy (BGU II 423)), increased considerably. At Vindolanda, both men and women were involved in writing; language and handwriting suggest a sophisticated documentary culture; the documents also reveal how far the lives of soldiers were administered through the use of documents. At sanctuaries like Bath and Uley, a large corpus of curse tablets (*defixiones*) largely reflects the literacy of people of lower social status, while the variety of hands as well

as the varied competence in Latin syntax and spelling suggest that many were able to write them personally. On the other hand, the absence of written texts at many other cult places may have been a deliberate choice. The approximately two hundred tally lists of kiln charges from La Graufesenque (Marichal 1988) suggest that the local potters, using both Gaulish and Latin, were competent in a particular specialized literacy with graffiti showing an “ease” in *ductus*. Also, for instance, one may adduce a butcher’s account from the “small town” Sains-du-Nord (Nord), and a Gallic text with a possible *epithalamium* as well as other mixed Latin/Gallic texts from Châteaubateau (Seine-et-Marne). There are also stamps and *tituli picti* in large quantities on *terra sigillata* production and amphorae, though rarely on local pottery productions.

Writing equipment is an additional indicator for the spread of ancient literacy. Finds of writing instruments become increasingly common in the Principate. Among others, they consist of styli, seal-boxes, seal rings, ink-wells, as well as previously misidentified artifacts, such as wax spatulas, rulers, pens for ink-writing, and knives for cutting and sharpening quills. Large assemblages of metal and bone styli from urban, military, and rural sites reveal people’s literacy (e.g., 160 styli from Silchester, 600 from Vindonissa). The unequal distribution of writing instruments results from differences in archaeological research: for example, writing instruments have rarely been identified in Italy.

CONCLUSION

While literacy may have been more prevalent among the elite (and their clients, slaves, and freedmen) or those associated with Roman power (army, administration, tax collection, *annonae*), a “bundle of literacies” must be acknowledged (Woolf 2002: 184f.). Many people were capable of writing if they needed it. This included (on an unprecedented scale compared with Hellenistic–republican times) many “lower class” people, like craftsmen,

merchants, bankers, and farmers. Major regional differences within the empire, especially between northwestern Europe and the central and eastern Mediterranean, are also apparent. It is the expectations of a Roman literate society that created the preference for writing over iconographic representations: for example, the boundary stones, which mark the territories of the *coloniae* of Arles and Aix-en-Provence (ILN-3, 274–86), exclusively use writing and no heraldic devices, unlike similar markers in medieval and modern times. This does not reflect the degree of literacy in these local societies, but it does indicate a society in which people were expected to cope with writing. We can recognize the evolution of different strands of literacy, each of which may have its own chronology and distribution. From the fourth century CE, literacy seems to be once again largely limited to the elite, professional scribes, and to religious and administrative texts.

SEE ALSO: Education, Greece and Rome;
Literacy, Byzantine; Literacy, Greco-Roman
Egypt; Literacy, Greece.

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