Literacy in the Roman world

What is literacy?

When assessing Rome’s literature or her class system, it is important to consider the concept of literacy. The Romans provide a number of contradictory accounts and evidence for literacy in the Roman world, and modern scholarship often reflects these variations. Fundamentally, an assessment of literacy requires a definition of the term. So what is literacy? In a modern context, where literacy is often associated with education, it is simply defined by whether or not a person can read. However, it is worth noting that distinctions are employed to describe linguistic ability (e.g. fluent, conversational, basic). These exist because, in reality, there is a profound difference in ability between being able to speak, to read, to compose, and to order a beer. Moreover, language can be learned in formal classes or informal interaction (e.g. living in a foreign country or with people who speak that language). When we consider literacy in the Roman world, we must be careful not to impose modern assumptions about education but must also acknowledge that understanding a language has many different levels and is therefore difficult to define in simple terms.

Many of the debates on ancient literature spring not only from divergent evidence but from the fact that scholars have different definitions of literacy. For example, Professor William Harris, one of the most distinguished scholars on the subject, suggests a very low rate for literacy in the ancient world (10 per cent at best). He reached this conclusion by assessing a variety of evidence, from the ancient sources to archaeological surveys, and searching for conclusive proof for formal education, either as a concept or as an object (e.g. school buildings). His opinion is contested by a number of scholars who cite case studies in places like Pompeii, where, in addition to monumental inscriptions, there is an abundance of graffiti in houses, bars, brothels and notably on the steps of public buildings, which could have been used as covered venues for teaching (see the bibliography below). The poet Martial complains about the constant barrage of noise in the city: ‘There’s no place for a poor man to think or rest. Schoolmasters disturb life in the morning, the bakers at night, the coppersmiths hammer all day’ (Epigrams 12.57). Grouping schoolteachers with other skilled labourers suggests that they were common features of everyday life in a town. Moreover, the graffiti in Pompeii, like modern graffiti in a public toilet, often represents not a one-off comment but a dialogue between two or more individuals, suggesting that it was, at least on some occasions, read by an audience (Slide 2). Harris counters these arguments by citing the poor quality of the graffiti, noting that quoting (or more often misquoting) Virgil’s Aeneid on a tavern wall does not make a man literate. His concept of literacy is in line with modern definitions – formal education and having the ability to read, speak and compose in a language. And indeed, if one accepts this definition of literacy, his arguments stand up well.

However, when a classics scholar visits Rome, his or her ability to read Virgil may not transfer to reading the monumental inscription on the Arch of Septimius Severus or the ‘chicken scratch’ (to use Plautus’ term for handwriting) (Slide 3) on a wall in Pompeii. These distinctions should remind us that unilateral definitions of literacy often fail upon application. Knowledge of basic letter forms and numbers (many of the graffiti from Ostia are simply letters of the alphabet) was required for commercial
purposes and/or the assembly of buildings whose parts bore painted labels. (A recently dislodged block at the Colosseum still bore the mason’s painted mark for assembly on the back.) This is certainly not literacy by the modern definition of the term, but it does imply a basic ability to recognize letters. Rome’s imperial dedications were quite formulaic, and like a five-year-old learning to read today, if a Roman learned about fifty high-frequency words and abbreviations, he/she could have read the language on most buildings, statues and coins quite easily. In Petronius’ Satyricon (58), a father boasts that his son can read ‘stone letters’, suggesting that this was considered a form of literacy. In a technological world that is dominated by icons, it is not difficult to imagine how monumental abbreviations such as IMP (Imperator) and SPQR (Senatus Populusque Romani) evolved into a language of their own. A very similar process is under way today, with the likes of ‘LOL’, ‘ROTFWL’ and ‘LMAO’ becoming ever more widespread.

It’s Greek to me: languages and the ‘Epigraphic Habit’

Literacy in the Roman world is often assumed to be in Latin. However, this did not become the predominant language in Roman Italy until the first century BC. Even then, in many eastern provinces and areas of southern Italy Greek remained in use. At Rome’s foundation (753 BC) and for the next 650 years, a number of languages existed in Italy (Slide 4). Each of these employed a different alphabet and two (Etruscan and Oscan) were written right to left (Slides 5–6), as opposed to the left to right of Latin and Greek (Slide 7). Fluency in more than one of these languages would have required a great deal of effort. Literacy rates, regardless of one’s definition of the term, were probably lower at this time, and there also seems to have been less writing on objects, statues, buildings, etc.

A study of the amount of written objects produced over the course of the Roman empire has tried to establish if there was any correlation between the number of inscriptions made and historic events. The emerging graph of inscribed monuments is called the ‘Epigraphic Habit’ and it appears to echo both the rise and the fall of the Roman empire, as well as a number of more minor social and political events. Unsurprisingly, a strong administration tended to produce more monuments. The ‘Epigraphic Habit’ has also been used to evaluate practices in setting up monuments. It seems that, as the number of inscriptions increased, so did the use of formulae, abbreviations and high-frequency words. Similarly, when the carving of inscriptions decreased from the third century AD onwards, there was a corresponding decline in the use of formulae, abbreviations and high-frequency words. These practices should not be used diagnostically in assessing literacy, but the correlation is perhaps significant.

Global literacy: reading in the empire – East versus West

Given the size of Rome’s empire, another factor in ancient literacy was geography. Where someone lived in the empire could affect not only their accent but their vocabulary and even the language they spoke. While Latin was the language of Roman administration, Greek remained the predominant spoken language as well as the language for inscribed documents and papyri in the eastern parts of the empire. One aspect of monumental dedications is the appearance of Latin and Greek in
bilingual inscriptions. Unlike the bilingual inscription from Palermo (Slide 7), imperial bilingual inscriptions, particularly those from the first century AD, often present an unbalanced image of bilingualism. For instance, a dedication by the Emperor Augustus at the Artemision in Ephesus (Slide 8) placed the Latin text in large letters at the top of the stone, while the small Greek text is squeezed in at the bottom in smaller letters. Similarly, a dedication at the theatre at Lepcis Magna by Annobal Rufus places the Latin text well above its Punic counterpart (Slide 9). One does not need to be fluent in either language to see the implication of Roman superiority in these inscriptions. However, Greek was maintained for personal correspondence in the eastern parts of the empire: for example, an ostrakon (a slab of pottery from a broken vessel) from Egypt (now at the British Museum) records a letter from a soldier to his father (Slide 10).

Similar letters (mostly in Latin) have been found at a Roman fort at Vindolanda, near Hadrian’s Wall. These letters (Slide 11), known as the Vindolanda Tablets, suggest significant levels of literacy among Roman soldiers, even those posted at the fringes of the empire. However, it is more difficult to assess the spoken languages in the western parts of the empire as these did not have a written tradition. We also do not know when Latin became the common spoken language of Roman Britain. What we do have in Roman Britain are a number of monuments of dubious quality. For example, in Bath there is a dedication to the local goddess Sulis by a haruspex (a Roman priest; see Chapter 5) (Slide 12). Whoever carved this inscription assumed its reader would be familiar with abbreviations such as D(onum) D(edit) – ‘he gave this gift’ – but the organization of the letters on the stone, especially the two middle lines, is a mess. The letters are nicely carved, but it is hard not to question the literacy, if not the sobriety, of the person who chiselled them: for instance, they squeezed in an ‘e’ at the end of ‘Deae’ on the first line, tried to fit a long name on to line two, and missed out half the letters altogether (indicated in red on the slide). Many (although not all) of the inscriptions in Roman Britain share these qualities: fine letters but very poor organization of the text on the stone. So do we assume illiteracy for the men who were honoured or merely for the men who did the carving? Perhaps some of the Roman soldiers in Britain were masons – men who could carve stone but could not necessarily spell. These men would not fall into Harris’s definition of literate. While one might want to be optimistic about rates of literacy, his perspective provides an admirable ballast that prevents scholars from assuming too much from ancient sources.

**Text and art**

Often, when assessing literacy, one treats the writing in isolation; and in literary sources this approach is merited. However, for the viewer of an ancient monument, a message could often be gleaned by ‘reading’ the monument with or without reading the inscription. In a number of places where writing is included, such as on mosaics and wall paintings, it frequently plays an almost decorative role, suggesting that the owner of such writing was literate. For example, a floor mosaic from the fourth century AD, discovered on the Borghese estate in the nineteenth century, depicts a number of gladiatorial fights in which the characters are named (Slide 13). The names add personality to the events depicted but they are hardly crucial to understanding the scene. Even the use of the Greek letter theta for thanatos (‘dead’) is superfluous, as
the individual in question is portrayed collapsed on the ground, at the feet of standing victors.

Being literate was a statement of pride in society and it is a popular motif in wall paintings as well as on household objects featuring scenes from popular myths and literature. Such inscriptions, like the one on a bronze colander from Pompeii, could imply literacy in even the most mundane settings (Slide 14). However, although these objects give the impression of wealth and education, we cannot assume that their owners possessed either. The aspiring *nouveau riche* character of Trimalchio in Petronius’ *Satyricon* warns us of the difference between acquiring wealth and acquiring education. A number of wall paintings from Pompeii depict people with the trappings of a literate education. A portrait of a baker found in the House of T. Terentius Neo depicts a man with a scroll and his wife with a writing tablet and a stylus thoughtfully in her mouth (Slide 15). Does the rendering of these objects signify a depth of education in Roman society or were they merely used in everyday work? Need one exclude the other? Young boys are depicted carrying scrolls labelled ‘Plato’. This reminded me of my daughter’s first picture from nursery when she was three: she was sitting at a table, looking at a book. She was not ‘literate’ by any definition of the word, but it was a lovely image for the mantelpiece. Such distinctions should be kept in mind when interpreting this type of evidence.

**Conclusions**

One thing is certain with respect to the topic of ancient literacy: the debate will continue. In developing your own opinion, use as many different types of evidence as you can find, consider both what it reveals and what it cannot tell us about literacy, and bear these in mind the next time you see a Latin inscription in a museum or at an ancient site.

**Web resources**

For graffiti in Pompeii, see: [http://www.pompeiana.org/resources/ancient/graffiti%20from%20pompeii.htm](http://www.pompeiana.org/resources/ancient/graffiti%20from%20pompeii.htm)
For graffiti in Ostia, see: [http://www.ostia-antica.org/inter/graffiti.html](http://www.ostia-antica.org/inter/graffiti.html)

**Bibliography**