

## BOOK REVIEW

*Writing and Power in the Roman World: Literacies and Material Culture*. By HELLA ECKARDT. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 268. Hardback, \$80.00. ISBN 978-1-108-41805-8.

This is a book full of exciting ideas. Recent years have seen a surge of scholarly work devoted to different aspects of writing in the Roman world, particularly addressing themes of power and control,<sup>1</sup> legitimacy,<sup>2</sup> and multilingualism.<sup>3</sup> Eckardt's volume extends this field of study by considering the role that writing played in Roman society through the mediums of material culture. The author uses inkwells as one of her main sources of study, and shifts the focus from traditional typological analysis to instead examine the means by which these objects were created, shaped, used and represented in the different regions of the Roman Empire.

The first part introduces the different approaches to literacy and writing in Rome, setting the scene for us to understand these phenomena via the mediums of material culture. This part also establishes the importance of the three themes which then recur throughout the book: power, identity, and practice. The second part tackles a material culture case study using inkwells, focusing on metal types and providing a complete catalogue of these previously completely neglected artefacts.<sup>4</sup> The book also offers a set of maps placing the inkwells geographically in the different areas of the empire. Finally, the third part considers writing equipment particular to funerary contexts, as in these spheres identity is concretely enacted and represented through material culture.<sup>5</sup> It concludes summa-

<sup>1</sup> E.g. A. Bowman & G. Woolf, *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> E. A. Meyer, *Legitimacy and Law in the Roman World* (Cambridge, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> A. Mullen & P. James, *Multilingualism in the Graeco-Roman Worlds* (Cambridge, 2012); A. Mullen, *Southern Gaul and the Mediterranean: Multilingualism and Multiple Identities in the Iron Age and Roman Periods* (Cambridge, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Available online: [http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/inkwells\\_2016](http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/inkwells_2016)

<sup>5</sup> In that sense, the author follows J. Pearce, *Contextual Archaeology of Burial Practice: Case Studies from Roman Britain* (Oxford, 2013).

rizing the importance of literacy to the construction of social identity and its expression in the material archaeological record.

One of Eckardt's main arguments is that here was a clear literate mentality in the Roman world that shaped the minds and lives of all those interacting in it. Even if writing was a key aspect of Roman culture, however, we should avoid graphocentrism<sup>6</sup> when studying these phenomena, since there is a marked difference between giving importance to writing in society and being literate. A second assertion that roots deeply into Eckardt's thesis and shapes the body of the book is that writing should be seen as both an individual act and a social practice.<sup>7</sup> In that sense, the author is theoretically bridging the gap between the individual's writing habits and the semiotic perception of writing in public-related contexts. Even if these theoretical statements are relevant to the widely studied theory of the "epigraphic habit",<sup>8</sup> Eckardt has—rightly in this reviewer's opinion—left behind these Romanization approaches to focus on exploring the social milieu in which inkwells were used.

Eckardt contextualizes and compares inkwells to other sources of evidence and then places them within their social and spatial context. Firstly, she organizes inkwells into different categories, some of them existing previously, and others created by herself. She also problematizes the spatial distribution of inkwells: while at first glance (via the maps included in the book) it appears that the lack of inkwells would indicate areas where evidence of writing is completely absent. But Eckardt reminds us that an absence of writing material should not be considered as an indication of a lack of literacy in these areas, but rather as an absence of publications, excavation or different deposition levels. In retrospect the latter seems a simplistic statement, but it should be given serious consideration when addressing any material culture study across the Roman Empire. In this way, Eckardt's research resonates with other studies of writing via the mediums of material culture, such as commercial epigraphy. Overall, she offers a promising new approach for scholars interested in studying this type of material, and leaves the

<sup>6</sup> By 'graphocentrism' is meant the conception that writing implies being more evolved, e.g., J. Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, 1977); id., *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> C. Haas, *Writing Technology: Studies in the Materiality of Literature* (Mahwah, 1996), xii.

<sup>8</sup> R. MacMullen, "The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire," *American Journal of Philology* 103-3 (1983), 233–246. For further developments of that theory, see E. A. Meyer, "Explaining the Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire: The Evidence of Epitaphs," *Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990): 74–96; ead., "Epigraphy and Communication," in M. Peachin (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World* (Oxford, 2011), 191–226.

door open (as the author acknowledges in her “future work” section) to add material which will be discovered in the future.

There are aspects of this book that could be further developed in future studies, such as the legal side of material culture, evidenced in some iconographic examples of writing equipment from Campania representing the world of *negotium*.<sup>9</sup> However, Eckardt’s work is an inspiring *exercice de style*, and this reviewer hopes that the strength of her findings will inspire many other scholars.

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<sup>9</sup> E. A. Meyer, “Writing Paraphernalia, Tablets, and Muses in Campanian Wall Painting,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 113 (2009), 569–597.