

BOOK REVIEW

Ancient Greek Letter Writing. A Cultural History (600 B.C.-150 B.C.). By PAOLA CECCARELLI. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 464. Hardcover, \$185.00. ISBN 978-0-19-967559.

Although ancient epistolography has been a fertile field of study over the past few decades, heretofore there has been no general study about the origins and evolution of the letter in Ancient Greece. Paola Ceccarelli's monumental book aims to fill this gap in modern scholarship by offering a comprehensive description of the development of letter writing in Greece from 600 BC to 150 BC.

After a short methodological introduction, which includes a summary overview of letter writing as a genre in Antiquity, the book is divided in two sections. The first, devoted to the origins of writing and the earliest letters in the Greek world, concludes with a detailed study of the narrative dimension of the letters in the work of the Greek historians, from Herodotus to Polybius. The second part focuses on the relationship between letter writing and the polis in three different spheres: the Athenian dramatic stage (comedy, tragedy and satyr-play), the orators (from Antiphon to Isocrates) and the official communication *per litteras* between the cities and the kings in the Hellenistic period.

Behind this simple structure lies a dense and exhaustively documented analysis of all testimonies of letter writing, both literary and epigraphic, from the Archaic period to the second century BC. In her attempt to describe the historical, cultural, social, political and narrative context of letter writing, Ceccarelli pays special attention to the specific circumstances in which Greeks resorted to letters (as opposed to oral messages) and to alternative means of written inter-state communication, such as city-decrees. Numerous examples are included, in Greek with an English translation, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

This impressive task of documentation on Greek letter writing concludes with the three appendices. The first and the third contain an elaborate account of the extant epigraphic letters (the Archaic and Classical documents on sheets of lead or ceramic sherds and the official letters of the Hellenistic period on stone,

respectively), while the second gathers the most relevant testimonies about the invention of writing in the ancient sources.

The ambitious goal of studying the development of letter writing in the Greek world until the beginning of our era set by the author, however, encounters limitations due to the nature of the surviving material. First, a considerable portion of the literary evidence comes from, and is related to, Athens, while the Archaic and Classical documentary letters belong to a cultural and linguistic milieu which is almost exclusively Ionic-Attic. Only the section about Hellenistic official letters provides a wider view of letter writing in the Greek world. In addition, although the author's argument of a linear evolution towards a standard typology of the letters is compelling, especially in light of the highly standardized papyri letters of the Roman period, the early epigraphic material is too scanty, heterogeneous and fragmentary to allow any definitive conclusion on the matter. Indeed, not all the early letters are "relatively haphazard transcriptions of oral messages" (ix). Some are mere messages, commands in a telegraphic style, but others already present the seed of the future "epistolary format" (address on the outside, greetings and farewell to the addressee, etc.). Furthermore, the earliest and longest letters, those of Achillodoros and Apatorios (Appendix I, nos. 1 and 5), are endowed with a remarkable expressivity and a careful written expression, despite being composed by traders in a situation of crisis. The further development of the genre is not surprising. The spontaneity of early letter writing, as well as the individual and local imprint, was replaced by standard formulae with a regular typology, as a consequence of the spread of education and literacy, and the influence of rhetoric.

Despite these unavoidable limitations, with her careful analysis of the extant material Ceccarelli admirably accomplishes her goal of studying long-distance communication in the Greek world. Her book not only provides a thorough examination of the origins, use and development of letter writing in the Greek world. It also offers a deep analysis of the primary and secondary sources in a rigorous but accessible manner, which makes it an indispensable tool for anyone interested in ancient Greek letters.

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