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Review of Bowman, A. K. and G. Woolf (eds). 1994. *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reviewed by Meghan Bellavance

The necessity of literacy in the modern world has led to a protracted fascination with literacy of the past, particularly in antiquity. Bowman and Woolf's edited volume contains thirteen essays discussing the relationship between literacy and power as they interact in site-specific contexts throughout the Mediterranean world. This engaging and articulate collection was born out of a conference held at Oxford in 1992 that addressed literacy in antiquity from a variety of areas of expertise. Because of the diversity of contributing authors the reader is left with a series of essays that examine societies that existed between 600 B.C.E. and 800 C.E. and span geographically from the heart of the classical world to the very fringes of the empire. Regardless of the setting or how the local population utilized literacy, the central theme remains that literacy was everywhere inseparable from power. Approaching this theme from different perspectives the contributing authors formulate their essays, which to varying degrees address the interplay between literacy and power in different cultural environments.

The editors begin with a compelling introduction that immediately asks, "Why study writing?" They give several possible answers, the first of which is that the recent academic surge in interest in literacy is merely a reflection of our own preoccupation with it and the necessity of being literate in the modern world. Additionally, they suggest that the study of historical writing is of importance because it is through text that we gain many of our insights into the past. Knowing who created, authorized and utilized texts is therefore essential if we are to use ancient texts as our sources for the construction of

history. Most importantly Bowman and Woolf suggest that through the diversity of writing and the multitude of ways which it can be used we can more fully examine the contemporary cultural, religious and political institutions. This recognition of the variety of literacy results in the absence of any specific definition of it and allows the contributors to demonstrate that the phenomena of writing occurred for many different reasons in different contexts.

While the main theme involves issues of literacy and power, relatively little time is spent discussing the latter topic. Only in the introduction is there any explicit discussion of power, but the authors make no attempt to define it and only mention that it is indivisible from literacy. In a brief framework they suggest that we can first think of power being exercised over texts. Such a power could manifest itself with restriction on who can view, read and create texts or how groups determine the status of a text. They also suggest that we should think of how power is exercised through texts, focusing on the power of the medium and the overall visual impact. Throughout the book the suggestion is that it is primarily through these two ways that power is connected with literacy, but it is important to note that the power can simultaneously be exercised both over and through texts.

The specific essays are arranged in chronological order beginning with D. M. Lewis' examination of the Persian records at Persepolis around the time of Darius. In his highly specialized and sometimes opaque study, Lewis demonstrates that the power of the elite was not contingent on their literacy but rather on the literacy of the trusted scribes who served them. Rosalind Thomas then examines the relationship between literacy and political control in classical Greece where she suggests such control was

maintained largely without the use of written documents. She compellingly argues that literacy was not a requirement for state cohesion in early classical Greece and it is only as there is a movement toward more elaborate tribute and taxation systems that complex written records are required. Jon Ray looks at literacy and language in late period Egypt and convincingly suggests that the relatively unchanging demotic script was a way of preserving Egyptian identity in the face of large immigrant communities. Dorothy Thompson examines Egypt during the Ptolemaic period and concludes that the reigning class created non-violent financial incentives for the resident population, especially the elite, to adopt Greek. In a similar vein Woolf looks at the spread of writing to the West and studies Gaul both before and after Roman conquest. In this fascinating and excellently written essay he concludes that native communities had considerable power in their adaptation or refusal of foreign written languages. In a different manner, Bowman looks at literacy within the conquering Roman military force by examining the many tablets, both military and civilian, found at Vindolanda. Through his translated excerpts of correspondence, particularly between civilians, he lends both reality and humanity to those living on the very edges of the Roman empire.

The essays then begin to shift their focus to the increasing use of textual documents in religious activities. In Martin Goodman's brief but effective essay he looks at the immense reverence directed toward the Hebrew bible as a written document, not only because of what it contains but because of the material object itself. From this he suggests that it is the writing, rather than the reading, of these texts that demonstrates religious power and results in the highly respected position of scribe within these Jewish communities. Contrastingly Robin Lane Fox looks at literacy and power in early

Christianity. He clearly argues that while the text itself was imbued with some power, it was the oral and visual relaying of these texts which was a fundamental aspect of early Christianity. S. Brock examines the influence of Greek over Syriac written and spoken language in late antiquity. From his logical analysis he suggests that, while small portions of the population were bilingual, it was only because Christianity lent added prestige to the Syriac language that Syriac was able to compete, at least in religious spheres, with the more dominant language of Greek.

The last three articles focus on the decline of the Roman empire and the Byzantine dark ages. C. Kelly begins by looking at later Roman archives to discuss how they paradoxically allowed for a more controlled rule of the empire, but also resulted in an overly informed and powerful class of bureaucrats who posed a potential threat to imperial rule. In his interesting, but not always convincing, discussion he suggests that confusion and complexity in the archival system was in many ways encouraged by the emperors as a way of protecting their power. In Peter Heather's well-written essay he persuasively maintains that the decline of literacy was a result of perceived threats from the north which required increasing militarization of the Roman elite. He concludes that literacy no longer led to a range of opportunities in high paying administrative careers and that the Roman population largely abandoned the previously lucrative pursuit of literacy for the more financially rewarding prospect of being a "warrior aristocrat" (196). Lastly, in a sometimes convoluted form, Averil Cameron argues that it was during the upheaval of the seventh and ninth centuries that polemical writing allowed for the creation of new groups and redefinitions of Christian teachings.

Throughout the essays it quickly becomes apparent that an immense amount of power is ascribed to the medium of writing. This is an often overlooked aspect of literacy but an important one nonetheless, for if the majority of the population was illiterate the medium on which the writing occurred would have a significant effect in signaling what was written. Thomas illustrates this best in her discussion of the monumental inscribed stones erected in classical Athens. These public displays were of importance not so much because of what was written on them but rather because of their powerful symbolic presence. Similarly, in Ptolemaic Egypt Thompson suggests that written documents were treasured not because of what was written on them (the owners were likely illiterate), but because they were endowed with the symbolic power of serving as documentation of personal ownership. Not only was the medium significant in political and commercial contexts but it was also vital in text based religions. This is made most clear in Goodman's discussion of Roman Judea where the destruction of a scroll could easily result in a Jewish riot. In all these cases we see that once the words are put to the material the object takes on the meaning and power of the words themselves.

The essays also do an excellent job at addressing the ranges of literacy which existed on the margins of the ancient world and how those literacies interacted with the dominant Greek and Roman cultural traditions. This is perhaps most evident in Woolf's discussion of literacy in Gaul. He ascribes considerable power to the fragmented groups inhabiting this region to either accept or reject the written languages that they were coming into contact with. Even when accepting the written language of dominant groups these communities modified and adapted the language to create hybrids such as Gallo-

discussion of the rejection of literacy by native groups, Woolf touches on a powerful and fascinating aspect of social resistance. He suggests that certain groups from southern France systematically refused to adapt or adopt Greek writing, exposing how power can be gained both through accepting literacy and through consciously rejecting it.

Related to this discussion are the ways in which literacy was used as a tool to facilitate assimilation. While Woolf discusses this relationship, it becomes most clear when examining the Egypt of antiquity which was filled with large immigrant populations. Ray illustrates that these immigrant populations were more or less willingly accepted by the resident Egyptian culture contingent on their adoption of the spoken language of demotic. While spoken demotic changed as it was influenced by these immigrant communities over time, it was preserved in a formal and dated style when written. Ray contends that the “pure” written form of demotic was a way for Egyptians to hold on to their identity in the face of the changing demographics of their country. Similarly in Thompson’s discussion of the Ptolemaic rule of Egypt she concludes that the gradual movement from Egyptian to Greek was facilitated by the Ptolemies who created financial incentives. Assimilation at the upper levels was encouraged by allowing the literate bureaucratic Egyptian class to keep their lucrative positions contingent on their use of Greek in administrative documents. In this way a mutually beneficial system was created to facilitate a top-down infiltration of written and spoken Greek.

The largest contribution of these essays is the ways in which they challenge our modern conceptions of literacy. That literacy is not a vital component for the formation of complex political systems sharply contrasts with modern ideas concerning the

progressive nature of literacy. A literate population with written laws and records is a modern requirement for a civilized society, yet such a society never truly existed in antiquity. Even our conception of what was considered barbarian is challenged as Woolf demonstrates that Romans were well aware of the written language of the barbarians of Gaul, yet the fact that such literacy existed within that population was not noteworthy and did nothing to elevate them from a barbarian status. Such a quick dismissal of literacy is unheard of today, for it is illiteracy that is a key factor in signaling modern barbarism. Even our modern perception that literacy represents a sign of personal achievement does not appear to hold true in antiquity. Nearly all the articles mention the role of scribes, and Church and Bowman both give ample evidence that elites rarely did much writing themselves. There is little evidence to suggest that illiterates were thought of, or thought of themselves, as failures. Even the textually based religions of Judaism and Christianity had ample room for illiterate participants, especially when they were not in direct positions of power as demonstrated by Goodman and Fox. Overall, in addressing the various areas where literacy interacts with institutions the authors all indicate that it is important to frame literacy within its specific context.

This collection is for the most part a diverse and compelling read, accessible to a casual reader, but probably of more interest to students of classics and history. One of the few areas of criticism pertains to the claim by the editors that the collection will bridge the difference between grand theory and case study. Neither the editors nor the contributors ever seem to address the grand theory of literacy, perhaps with the exception of the introduction, and the book is composed entirely of differing case studies. Rarely does one author refer to other works within the book, but instead they all concentrate on

their own study. The reader is then left on his own to examine the ways in which literacy and power might have acted similarly in differing contexts. A more cohesive view, one in which the authors utilized each other, or where there was a concluding chapter, would have been helpful in solidifying the vast amount of information presented. Even with a scarcity of over-arching theory, however, there is no doubt that these essays stand stronger together than apart and effectively highlight the many aspects of power and literacy which existed in antiquity.