

*Writing and Power in the Roman World: Literacies and Material Culture*. By H. Eckardt. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018. Pp. 282, illus. Price: £80. ISBN 9781108418058 (bound); 9781108284172 (e-book)

This welcome and well-written book explores the material aspect of Roman writing, its impact on the practice of writing and the relationship between writing equipment and identities in the Roman World. It is also to date the most comprehensive study of Roman metal inkwells.

Over the past three to four decades, research on Roman writing and literacy has changed. Several writing implements were newly identified as such (e.g. wax spatulas with Minerva bust handles), surveys of writing equipment that include rural areas have become more common and the concept of literacy more nuanced. The ‘material turn’ that E. applies to the study of ancient literacy is a more recent development. Moving on from trying to establish levels of literacy, the author’s core interests are the empowering qualities of literacy, the use and design of objects and the role of writing and writing equipment in shaping identities. Over the past years, this material approach to social history has notably been used by E. herself (e.g. *Objects and Identities: Roman Britain and the North-Western Provinces* (2014)) as well as for example by E. Swift (*Roman Artefacts and Society: Design, Behaviour and Experience* (2017)).

The book consists of three parts, each containing several chapters. Crucially for the topic, it is illustrated with good quality images throughout, including a number of colour plates. An online catalogue, available for download from the Archaeology Data Service, complements the discussion of metal inkwells.

Part I (chs 1–3) introduces E.’s approach and previous research on Roman writing and writing equipment and practice and attitudes towards it more generally and here one might have wished for a more focused engagement with the concept of power, which remains an implicit rather than explicit aspect of the book.

Part II (chs 4–7) provides a survey of 440 metal inkwells, the majority of which are from Italy and the north-western provinces. This focus arguably stems from biases such as different publication levels in different areas. E. identifies five types and 14 less clearly defined ‘groups’ of inkwells and also discusses related forms that are commonly mistaken for inkwells (ch. 5). An analysis of aspects such as portability and volume of inkwells, suggests that the way in which writing sets were transported changed over time and that Samian inkwells are puzzlingly large (ch. 6 – E.’s suggestion that they could have been used to store

ink seems unlikely considering e.g. how impractical their opening is for decanting). The distribution of finds is mapped both on the level of the site and that of depositional context, revealing a clear dominance of urban and military sites and burial contexts, from frontier provinces in particular (ch. 7).

Part III (chs 8–12) contextualises the evidence for metal inkwells in order to explore their role for the representation of identities. After discussing the iconographic depiction of writing equipment (ch. 8), E. balances the predominance of men in this evidence with a life course analysis of inkwell burials with regards to gender (ch. 9) and age (ch. 10). Ch. 11 considers other objects accompanying writing equipment deposited in graves, including various tools or grooming and dining equipment, and the role of writing equipment for the representation of possible professional identities.

Generally the analysis confirms that writing was connected with prestige in the Roman world. Writing implements –and metal inkwells in particular– are mainly found in high-status burials, and regional traditions show that the depiction of writing was used by the local sub-elite to express economic success. However, E. shows that we may have to be more open to including women and children when thinking of this writing ‘elite’, or of professional writers, for that matter. She also contributes to a further nuancing of our understanding of ‘Romanisation’, connecting writing equipment in provincial burials to the display of familiarity with high-status practices rather than ‘Romanness’. Writing had the power to ‘profoundly shap[e] society’ (p. 231) and metal inkwells had their role to play in this process. How this prestigious activity of writing was related to power, however, is not so much argued as presupposed.

This book is an excellent entry point for anyone interested in Roman writing equipment and at the same time an invaluable resource for those already familiar with the topic. With its focus on metal inkwells it moreover puts one of several under-researched writing implements into the spotlight. The interesting results yielded by a material approach, social distribution analysis and detailed contextualisation of metal inkwells show the potential of the study of such objects for research areas such as writing culture, literacy, Latinization, and identity.

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