

Anejos de Veleia

Series Minor 39

NOEMÍ MONCUNILL MARTÍ
MANUEL RAMÍREZ-SÁNCHEZ
(EDS.)

Aprender la escritura, olvidar la escritura

Nuevas perspectivas sobre
la historia de la escritura
en el Occidente romano

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SOCIO-LITERACY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING LITERACY IN THE ROMAN NORTH-WEST*

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Abstract: This chapter presents the scope and limitations for work on provincial writing equipment and how we might use it to understand literacy in the Roman world. The approach advocated here is to side-step the debate over percentages of literacy for each province and rather to focus on literacy in its social context. Using the datasets from the *Roman Inscriptions of Britain Online*, the *Portable Antiquities Scheme* and the *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain* project, we set the scene for *Britannia* in a brief case-study. Literacy correlates neatly with military and urban settlement, and, in rural contexts, roads, production centres, higher population, administrative/small-scale market functions and status were key drivers. Military presence, however, does not seem to be closely related to the spreading of literacy to local rural communities in *Britannia*. The military clearly played a role in spreading literacy, but this may have been for the soldiers themselves, their immediate local interlocutors, their families and homelands, rather than necessarily for the hinterlands in which they were stationed. Cross-provincial work combining epigraphic and archaeological evidence and using a socio-literacy approach will allow us to explore the dynamics of military settlement and other drivers of literacy and their impact across the Roman North-West.

Keywords: epigraphy, literacy, military, north-western provinces, Roman Britain, rural, writing equipment.

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Socio-literacy: una aproximación interdisciplinar para comprender la alfabetización en el noroeste romano

Resumen: Este capítulo presenta el alcance y las limitaciones del estudio de los instrumentos de escritura en las provincias y como este puede utilizarse para entender la alfabetización en el mundo romano. La aproximación aquí propuesta pasa por dejar de lado el debate sobre los porcentajes de alfabetización en cada provincia y, en lugar de ello, colocar el foco en la alfabetización dentro de su contexto social. Usando la información de bases de datos como *Roman Inscriptions of Britain Online* o *Portable Antiquities Scheme* y del proyecto *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain*, podemos plantear *Britannia* como un caso de estudio. La alfabetización se correlaciona intensamente con los asentamientos militares y urbanos, mientras que en los contextos rurales son los caminos, los centros de producción, las poblaciones, los centros administrativos y mercantiles y el estatus los que actuaron como difusores clave. Sin embargo, la presencia militar no parece guardar una estrecha relación con la difusión de la alfabetización en las comunidades rurales locales de *Britannia*. Los militares claramente tuvieron un papel en la extensión de la alfabetización, pero ello pudo haber sido fruto de las necesidades de los propios soldados ante sus interlocutores locales, sus comunidades y sus familias más que por los requerimientos de las zonas de interior donde estaban estacionados. El trabajo interprovincial combinando la evidencia epigráfica y arqueológica y utilizando una aproximación basada en la *socio-literacy* nos permitirá explorar las dinámicas del asentamiento militar y otros difusores de la alfabetización y su impacto en el noroeste romano.

Palabras clave: epigrafía, alfabetización, ejército, provincias noroccidentales, *Britannia romana*, espacios rurales, instrumentos de escritura.

1. PENS MIGHTIER THAN SWORDS: MULTIPLE FUNCTIONS OF WRITING EQUIPMENT IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Styli are occasionally described as having unusual functions in the ancient world. Plutarch recounts an anecdote (De soll. an. 968E) according to which an elephant living in Rome has been mistreated by boys who pricked its trunk with styli. The elephant hoists one of the miscreants into the air and looks as if he might smash him to the ground, but instead lowers him gently, deciding that giving him a bit of a scare was enough. In another passage, with a brutal conclusion, Plutarch presents a vivid picture of Antyllius, a servant of the consul Opimius, who had been ferrying sacrificial entrails around and insulting members of the opposing Gracchan faction when he met his end, killed with

styli¹: «Antyllius was immediately killed on the spot, stabbed by large writing implements, said to have been made for that purpose» (Plutarch, *Life of Gaius Gracchus* 13). This detail about the murder weapon is curious: it is unclear what these μεγάλα γραφεῖα ‘large writing implements’ are and what Plutarch means by the comment that they had been made for the purpose. Is the choice of weapon meant to highlight that the assassins are literate? What significance might that have had in Late Republican Rome? How common and important was it to be, and to be seen to be, literate? These questions on the social status of literacy and its extent and role in society have long exercised, and eluded, commentators.

Employing writing equipment as weaponry was no doubt *not* common in the ancient world, but these quirky snapshots remind us of the range of possible uses, and abuses, of the items and our difficulty in reconstructing the functions, value and contexts of literacy based on our partial archaeological record. The primary function of writing equipment would of course have been for writing, but there is a status attached to literacy and a symbolic value in writing implements which mean that they are suitable for iconographic representation in villas, for deposition in funerary and ritual contexts, for turning into beautiful, inscribed objects, such as the octagonal, inscribed stylus from the Bloomberg excavations in London², and even for miniaturizing³. In addition to its obvious practical uses, writing equipment served important aesthetic and symbolic functions in the Roman world (as did writing itself), which perhaps we may never fully grasp. In a volume on scripts and approaches to writing in the Roman West we should also look beyond the philological and graphemic considerations of scripts and consider the equipment of writing and how it might relate to social contexts of literacy.

2. MODERN APPROACHES TO ANCIENT LITERACY

Levels of literacy, and indeed the definition of literacy itself, have long exercised Classicists⁴. Since the late 1980s, when thinking about literacy in the Roman world, we have constantly turned to Harris’s *Ancient Literacy*, a towering

¹ Caesar famously wounds Casca’s arm with his stylus during his assassination (Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar*, 82).

² Tomlin 2018a, 205; Tomlin 2018b.

³ For example, the miniature stylus tablet codex in ivory from Ptuj in north-eastern Slovenia currently on display in the National Museum of Slovenia.

⁴ For bibliography up until 1987, see Harris 1989, for subsequent publications, see Werner 2009.

work covering both the Greek and Roman worlds, whose author railed against notions of mass literacy:

Levels of literacy were low in classical antiquity by comparison with those prevailing in the most educated countries of the last 200 years. That is entirely to be expected, for each society achieves the level of literacy which its structure and ethos require and its technology permits. (Harris 1989, 331)

For over thirty years this book has avoided any fatal blows from a barrage of criticism, ranging from the nit-picking to the more serious. Scholarship has generally not tried to argue for radically higher levels of literacy⁵, but has questioned Harris's core assumption that the conditions were not present in the Graeco-Roman world for anything but very low levels of literacy⁶, has underlined the problems with generalizing about worlds which covered a vast time and space⁷, and has presented a range of evidence to counter claims which contributed to the creation of what might be termed a «pessimistic view» of ancient literacy. Bowman rightly cautions that, though we can support a lack of «mass literacy», it is «misleading to argue that mass literacy and widespread literacy are the same thing. There is good reason to believe in a very wide spread of literate skills in the ancient world»⁸.

One issue with Harris's original book-length statement on ancient literacy is its largely textual evidence base: literary texts and, primarily lapidary, epigraphy. His figures for provincial literacy rates were based on the inscriptions in *CIL* (and its regional successors)⁹, an illustrious series but with limitations and a bias towards lapidary texts. Even if the coverage of *CIL* were consistent across the provinces, what we are treating is not so much a proxy for literacy as for what MacMullen (1982) famously termed «the epigraphic habit» —areas where expression in monumental form *and* literacy is present¹⁰. Lapidary texts are not present everywhere that literacy has been adopted and do not even necessarily correlate neatly with areas of high uptake of what might be termed «Roman culture». Easily citable percentages are particularly enticing, however, so it is those estimated by Harris which are still used in Roman studies, and beyond, despite, and sometimes divorced from, Harris's own robust caveats and the subsequent scholarly debates¹¹.

⁵ See Woolf 2002, 183: «reviews of this important book have broadened discussion of literacy rather than rejecting his central thesis on literacy levels».

⁶ See, for example, Woolf 2000, 878-880.

⁷ See, for example, Humphrey 1991, Cooley 2002.

⁸ Bowman 1991, 123.

⁹ Harris 1989, 265-268.

¹⁰ Bodel notes that Harris's use of lapidary inscriptions per 1,000 km² «has been shown to be insufficient as even a rough index of levels of provincial literacy» (2014, 758).

¹¹ Harris has published numerous shorter pieces refining and defending his stance, e.g. Harris 1995; 2014; 2018.

In order to advance understanding of literacy in the Roman world we should integrate a much broader range of evidence, not only the variety of non-lapidary epigraphy (writing tablets, curse tablets, so-called *instrumentum domesticum*, etc.) —which has increasingly been on the agenda for social historians, epigraphists and linguists in recent decades, including Harris (e.g. 1993; 1995; 2014)— but also the non-textual sources, particularly the archaeological evidence for writing equipment. Although the latter development might seem obvious to an outsider to the classical field, the fragmentation of our discipline means that epigraphic and (non-epigraphic) archaeological materials are rarely rigorously coordinated and practitioners do not necessarily work closely together and have different perspectives and approaches to what may turn out to be very similar questions.

3. INVESTIGATING ANCIENT WRITING EQUIPMENT

Detailed work on Roman small finds by experts such as Michel Feugère has led to an appreciation of the wide range of, and variety within, types of writing equipment¹². First there are the implements directly used for writing with, such as the stylus (*stilus*) used on wax tablets but also on surfaces such as lead and wood, the pen (*calamus*) employed to write in ink (*atramentum/cinnabaris*) (fig. 1), and brush (*penicillus*) for painting ink or paint onto, for instance, pottery or walls. Secondly there are the materials for writing on, such as the wooden/ink/leaf tablets (*tiliae*), stylus/wax tablets (*cerae/tabulae ceratae*), papyrus (*papyrus/charta*), parchment/vellum (*membrane/pergamena*), metal sheets and tags, etc., which are made expressly for the purpose¹³. Other material includes a series of accessories for the good functioning of the aforementioned equipment, such as the inkwell/ink pot (*atramentarium, atramentale*), penknife (*scalprum (librarium)*), sponge (*spongea*), spatula (for scraping old wax from tablets and for spreading and smoothing new wax); accessories for transportation, such as the stylus/pen case (*grapharium*), writing case (*theca calamaria*), leather case for stylus tablets, and book box/bucket (*capsa/scrinium/cista*); accessories for helping with ordination such as dividers, folding measures, rulers, and for storage and filing such as separators and labels (*sillyba*).

¹² See, for example, Božič & Feugère 2004.

¹³ Non-purpose made materials, or materials which have another primary function, such as pottery or glass vessels, walls, spoons, can also be used for writing, but are usually only identified as such when texts are present and thus become «epigraphic».



FIGURE 1

Pen from Vindolanda, UK, with iron nib and wooden shaft, c. AD 100-105¹⁴.
© Vindolanda Trust

A major consideration is whether these items of Roman-period writing equipment can be used, or not, in some cases, as proxies for literacy¹⁵. Naturally in the North-West this can also have a specifically linguistic dimension, in that the proxy can also extend to Latinization itself, at least in certain provinces, for example the Germanies and Britain¹⁶, and, during the imperial period at least, in large parts of the Iberian Peninsula (Gaul poses problems, since in certain areas Gaulish is also attested in writing into the imperial period). The use of writing equipment as a proxy for Latinization was the focus of a well-received article by Derks and Roymans in 2002. They specifically focused on seal boxes (fig. 2), which they linked directly to the use of single seals on private documents such as letters. (In hindsight, this turned out not to be a completely secure choice. We shall return to the «problem» of seal boxes in section 6.) They demonstrated that in the Rhine delta there was a clear divergence in the distribution of seal boxes. The area of the *civitas Batavorum*, characterised by native-

¹⁴ This item (catalogue number SF3613) was likely to have been used to write on the numerous tablets that have been found at Vindolanda. It was found in the kitchen refuse pit of the *praetorium* with a number of ink writing tablets. It is possible that these pens may also have been used as styli for wax tablets, though this is not the primary interpretation by the archaeologists at the site and this example in fact retained traces of ink on the wooden shaft (Birley 1999, 29). Some commentators think that they were ox goads, though this seems unlikely given their size and the form of the nib (see discussion in Eckardt 2018, 32).

¹⁵ Hanson and Conolly call this the «more indirect archaeological approach» (2002, 151).

¹⁶ Virtually no written British Celtic is attested apart from in names in the Iron Age and Roman period. For two possibly Celtic texts from Roman Bath (which could be British Celtic or Gaulish), see Mullen 2007. Celtic may also occur in two unpublished curse tablets from Uley.

type farmhouses, contained evidence «for a widespread knowledge of literacy among rural populations»¹⁷, unlike in surrounding rural areas, for example populated by the Cananefates. Derks and Roymans were careful to explain that in part the dense concentration of seal boxes in the *civitas Batavorum* might be dependent on post-depositional processes and the archaeo-political climate, but it also appeared to reflect historical circumstances, especially exceptionally high recruitment of auxiliary soldiers to the Roman army. Their argument ran that soldiers were exposed to Latin, literacy, and documentation on the job and that, in turn, veterans returning home and serving personnel writing home were the drivers behind this localised flourishing of rural literacy. Unfortunately since the work of Derks and Roymans very few studies have focused on more than one item of writing equipment and/or above the provincial scale¹⁸.

At a first glance, therefore, there appears to be promising scope for some important research into writing equipment and literacy and Latinization in the provinces. Writing equipment comes in various shapes and sizes and may be preserved on sites where the texts themselves, for example on stylus tablets or thin wooden sheets, have disintegrated. It provides a set of complementary evidence to add to the discussions on the social dimensions of literacy and offers the opportunity for intra- and inter-provincial comparisons since writing equipment is found across the Roman world.

However, there are two key reasons why such obviously important research has not already been undertaken. First, identifying writing equipment can be surprisingly difficult. The stylus is a case in point. Corroded pieces of iron or other metals in thin, circular section ranging from a few centimetres to c. 20 can be styli, or equally could have been hair pins, fish hooks, ear picks, nails and so on. And, of course, this works both ways: items identified as any of the above in archives may be styli. The dating of such objects in the absence of a secure archaeological context is also problematic: styli were used in the medieval period at least in parts of western Europe. Since there has been relatively little interest over the centuries amongst scholars of the western provinces in studying writing equipment, this has contributed to a situation in which museum staff and local archaeologists have not necessarily been encouraged to identify relevant items, creating an unfortunate vicious circle. So we have to be cautious in our approach, as always with any evidence from the ancient world: the datasets are full of gaps and some areas are well endowed with published evidence, often as a result of sustained interest by individuals, creating a picture which does not reflect ancient realities. We need to be sure to appreciate

¹⁷ Derks & Roymans 2002, 102. The distribution of rural lapidary epigraphy is also strikingly more dense in the *civitas Batavorum* (*ibid.* 88-89).

¹⁸ With the exception of work by scholars such as Hella Eckardt 2014; 2017. Hartmann 2015 provides a useful inventory of Roman wax and leaf tablet finds.

the modes of collection and interpretation and to use the right scales of analysis, whether that may be a whole province, modern region or settlement, and to remember that contextualisation is always essential. Secondly, even when writing equipment *is* correctly identified, a straightforward link to literacy, and what that literacy in fact entails (Literacy for whom¹⁹? One person, multiple people? What level of literacy?), is not certain, not least because objects can be used, as we saw above, for functions other than the one for which they were originally intended, and illiterates can purchase such equipment as markers of status.

4. WRITING EQUIPMENT IN THE NORTH-WESTERN PROVINCES

As part of the European Research Council (ERC)-funded project LatinNow, we are working with groups across our core research area, the north-western provinces (the Iberian Peninsula, Gaul, the Germanies, and Britain), to establish what work has already been done or is in progress on writing equipment and seeking to establish a methodology for coordinating and interpreting the evidence. It became clear early on that our pre-project impression that there was very little coordination and few large-scale datasets was accurate, but we had not appreciated the depth of the problem with large sections of the western provinces offering no datasets and, even worse, no obvious way to collect relevant data since there had been decades of no interest or training in how to identify writing equipment on Roman sites or in museums²⁰.

Searching, for example, for Roman-period styli on the excellent *Artefacts* website offers 855 examples²¹, mostly from France and Switzerland, a few from southern England and none from the Iberian Peninsula except from one site, Empúries in Catalonia. In Portugal and Spain there has traditionally been relatively little activity concerning Roman writing equipment, though recent surveys across the peninsula and very detailed work in Mérida have been undertaken by Javier Alonso and colleagues (Alonso 2013; Alonso, Jerez Linde &

¹⁹ Eckardt notes that males are predominately represented in literary and iconographic representations but that there is a «surprising number of female burials with writing equipment» (2018, 229). See Eckardt 2018 for discussion of the human dimension of literacy, including practice, and correlations with age, gender and self-representation.

²⁰ The project team as a result determined to make a guide to writing equipment and its identification (Willi forthcoming) and to encourage international cooperation with a view to coordinating, systematizing and analysing datasets on the materials. The groundwork for this will be laid during the project, but the proposals will, we hope, form part of a future project. Eckardt notes that, in her collection of Roman inkwells, autopsy at Cologne alone identified 21 previously unpublished examples (2018, 114).

²¹ artefacts.mom.fr (last accessed 18.02.2020).

Sabio González 2014) and Oriol Olesti Vila and others have been working intensively in Catalonia, uncovering evidence for literacy in numerous second- and first-century BC so-called Iberian *oppida*, Ibero-Roman towns and Roman outposts alike (Oriol Olesti 2019, forthcoming). A large amount of work has been undertaken in select Roman centres across the North-West, such as Augst (Fünfschilling 2012; Furger, Wartmann & Riha 2009; Schaltenbrand Obrecht 2012) or, beyond our core study area, on sites such as Magdalensberg (Öllerer 1998), but nothing comprehensively, to our knowledge, on a provincial level. *Britannia* is the only province with province-wide detailed archaeological resources which use writing equipment as an object type to be recorded, and therefore offers datasets through which we can explore the spread and possible social contexts of literacy and Latinization across the entire province²². Comparisons with materials from other provinces will be possible, but the geographical areas compared will not be comparable in size until more systematic collection of materials can be undertaken and made available.

5. LATIN LITERACY IN *BRITANNIA*

Haverfield's early twentieth-century vision of a relatively Latinate and literate urban population in Roman Britain was challenged by Harris's study which argued that, amongst other things, the assiduous nature in which the inscriptions from the province have been collected and published (e.g. the *instrumentum domesticum* of *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* volume II (hereafter *RIB*)) skewed upwards our vision of levels of literacy²³. Roman Britain, or at least most of it, has subsequently regularly been depicted as an illiterate backwater in histories of the Roman world, maybe reaching literacy levels of no more than 5% or so.

The military, and to a lesser extent urban, bias in the «epigraphic habit» of Britain has long been appreciated²⁴. Mann (1985) argued that the phenomenon of writing in stone never took off amongst the local civilian population of *Britannia*. Recent decades of finds have not changed that picture: 1,130 of 2,800 inscriptions in *RIB* I and III (the largely lapidary volumes) come from

²² Some countries that make up part of Roman provinces, such as the Netherlands, provide important national-level resources for small finds e.g. PAN (the Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands), but these do not cover whole provinces and, in the case of PAN, is still in the development phase (Kars & Heeren 2018). At the time of writing the writing equipment entries had not yet been made public, though researcher access revealed that several are recorded, including two dozen styli.

²³ Harris 1989, 269-270.

²⁴ See, for example, Biró 1975.

the Hadrian's Wall frontier alone²⁵ (fig. 2)²⁶. Whilst access to suitable stone for carving may have some impact on patterns, this appears to be less significant than social factors. As Tomlin notes, South Dorset offers the easy-to-carve Portland stone (used extensively across centuries in London for facades of buildings), but just two tombstones (*RIB* I, 188; III 3047) and an early altar (III, 3046)²⁷. Evans in 1987 and 2001 analysed graffiti on pottery and showed that their distribution also showed a similar bias towards military sites and urban centres, though they were also widely distributed across rural sites²⁸. Evans's work reminded us that we needed to look beyond the lapidary epigraphic habit to tackle the social complexity of literacy.

Researchers over the last couple of decades, inspired in part by increased interest in small finds in both archaeology and epigraphy (*RIB* II), have reconsidered the minimalist view in a context of generally less pessimistic views on provincial Roman literacy²⁹. In a survey of Romano-British literacy published in 2004³⁰, Pearce does not deny that «on direct and indirect evidence, levels of literacy in Britain seem among the lowest of any part of the Roman world», but, based on his collection of writing tablets, he warns that «[s]ince preservation favours urban and military sites, the discovery of writing tablets on rural sites [...] may be more significant than the bald numbers suggest»³¹. He also argues that «we should be prepared to argue for a more generous view of literacy among the civilian population in the later Roman period» based on the evidence of curse tablets from the province³². Hanson and Conolly were more confident in their assessment of rural literacy based on the stylus finds stating that:

[t]he fact that so many lower-status settlements across the country-side have produced examples of *stili* is surely significant. This suggests that *stili* were in use across a number of site types spanning quite a wide socio-economic

²⁵ Tomlin 2011, 140. Tomlin estimates that fewer than 3,000 published inscriptions may represent a population of around 20 million during the centuries of epigraphic activity.

²⁶ Figure 2 plots the vast majority of the inscriptions in *RIB* I and III, however, a small number of items have been excluded as not relevant specifically for the «epigraphic habit» (defined as per MacMullen 1982), e.g. amulets and *defixiones*.

²⁷ Tomlin 2011, 138.

²⁸ As Eckardt points out the original study (Evans 1987) took into account the numbers of sites in each category but not the depth of deposits and the size of excavations. Evans (2001, 33-34) tackles this problem by counting numbers of graffiti per total number of sherds, but only for a small number of sites.

²⁹ «[T]he texts themselves and the tools for creating them, potentially indicate a greater capacity for participation in the culture of documents for some 'ordinary' provincials in the north-west provinces than has previously been allowed» (Häussler & Pearce 2007, 231).

³⁰ For another summary, see Ferris 2012.

³¹ Pearce 2004, 48. See also Raybould 1999.

³² Pearce 2004, 44.

grouping. Access to writing materials and, presumably, both knowledge of and use of literacy was not confined to the élite or more urbanized elements of Romano-British society³³.

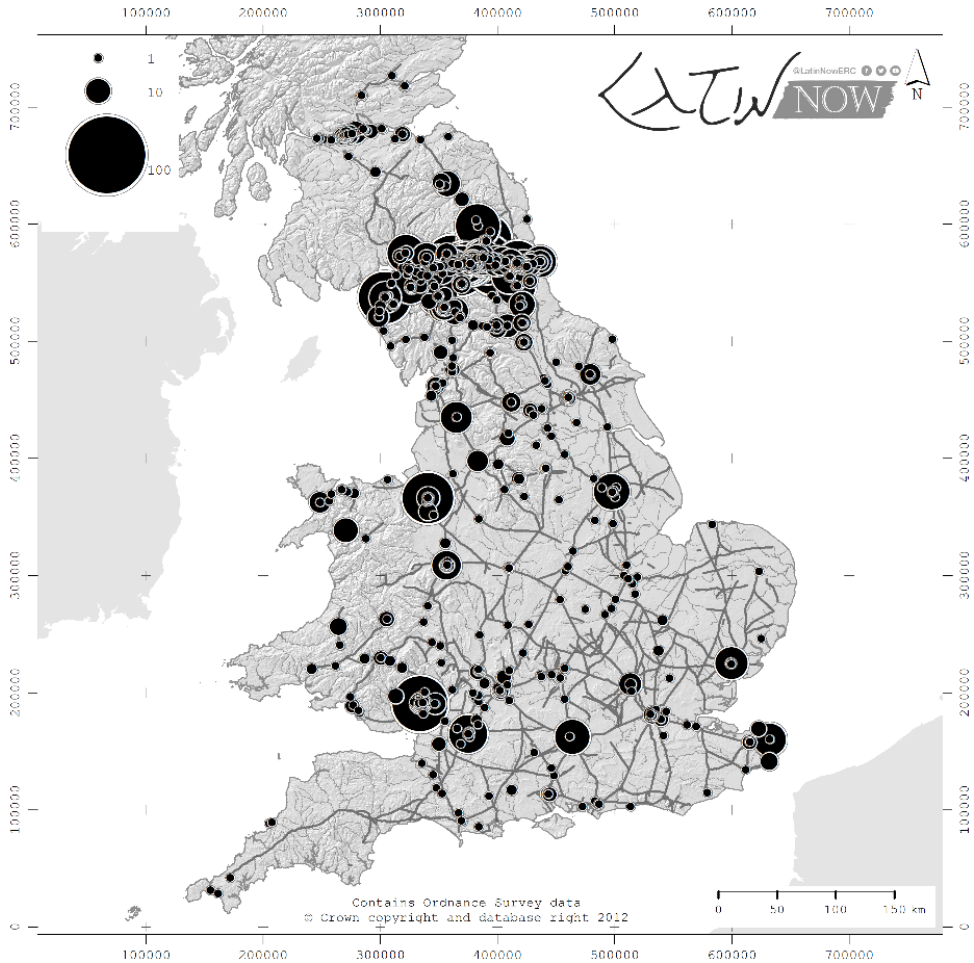


FIGURE 2

Lapidary and 'public' metal inscriptions from *RIB I* and *III*

Hanson and Conolly had trawled the excavation reports from the *British Archaeological Bibliography* and *British Archaeological Abstracts* and wrote to staff involved with Roman collections across the country to gather informa-

³³ Hanson & Conolly 2002, 156.

tion about finds of Roman-period styli on rural sites in the «civil zone»³⁴. The assembly of materials was not straightforward: some staff did not respond and several reported no documentation of styli in their collections, whilst also expressing the view that this might be a problem of identification and documentation rather than an absence of evidence³⁵. The results must therefore be viewed with awareness of the manner in which the data was constructed. Mattingly's comment in his *Imperial Possession* that «a number of interesting blanks in the distribution can be noted (Cornwall, Devon, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Shropshire), corresponding to areas with comparatively few villas» overlooks the fact that staff from several areas did not respond at all³⁶. Perhaps most importantly there is no attempt by Hanson and Conolly at any quantification either of stylus finds in the context of the total iron assemblage from sites or number of total sites in each category considered³⁷.

Cautious use of previous research and new data enables us to think about what we might call «differential literacy»³⁸ (Mullen 2016) and to move away from stark provincial percentages to pictures of social, chronological and geographical complexity —essentially a *socio-literacy* approach following *socio-linguistic* methodology. Two decades on from the work of Pearce, Hanson and Conolly, researchers are in a different world from a Romano-British rural small finds perspective, not least because of two significant resources, the *Portable Antiquities Scheme* (PAS) and the database of the *Rural Settlement of Roman Britain* (RSRB) project. The former «encourage[s] the recording of archaeological objects found by members of the public in England and Wales [...] by metal detector users, but also by people whilst out walking, gardening or going about their daily work»³⁹. Finds Liaison Officers (FLOs) are in charge of quality control of the c. 1.5 million items on the database. This resource complements excavation data and is generally of relevance for rural Roman contexts, given much of the material is found on arable land. The material provides snapshots of information across very wide geographical areas which are not driven by specific research questions, but should not be taken as in any way unbiased⁴⁰. The PAS data is a direct reflection of collecting and reporting practices: some areas of Britain (e.g. parts of East Anglia) with high

³⁴ Hanson & Conolly 2002, 155. A rather slippery term not clearly defined by the authors.

³⁵ I am grateful to Bill Hanson for passing on to the LatinNow team the correspondence used in the preparation of Hanson & Conolly 2002.

³⁶ Mattingly 2006, 461.

³⁷ This is no doubt because of the difficulties of assembling such information at that point.

³⁸ Kolb uses the terms «diversified or sectoral literacy» (2018, 9).

³⁹ finds.org.uk (last accessed 23.01.2020).

⁴⁰ See Brindle 2014; Richards, Naylor & Holas-Clark 2009; Robbins 2014, 37-51.

levels of metal detecting *and* good relationships with local FLOs produce more abundant records which do not necessarily reflect higher levels of Roman activity. There are also areas of the country in which metal detecting is not allowed (e.g. on Sites of Special Scientific Interest), and whilst this may not prevent the activity, finds tend not to be reported if found illegally. Not all FLOs are as well placed as others to identify Roman writing equipment so examples for some regions may have been missed, misidentified and/or not correctly dated. Nonetheless, despite the caveats, it is an important resource to consider in coordination with others.

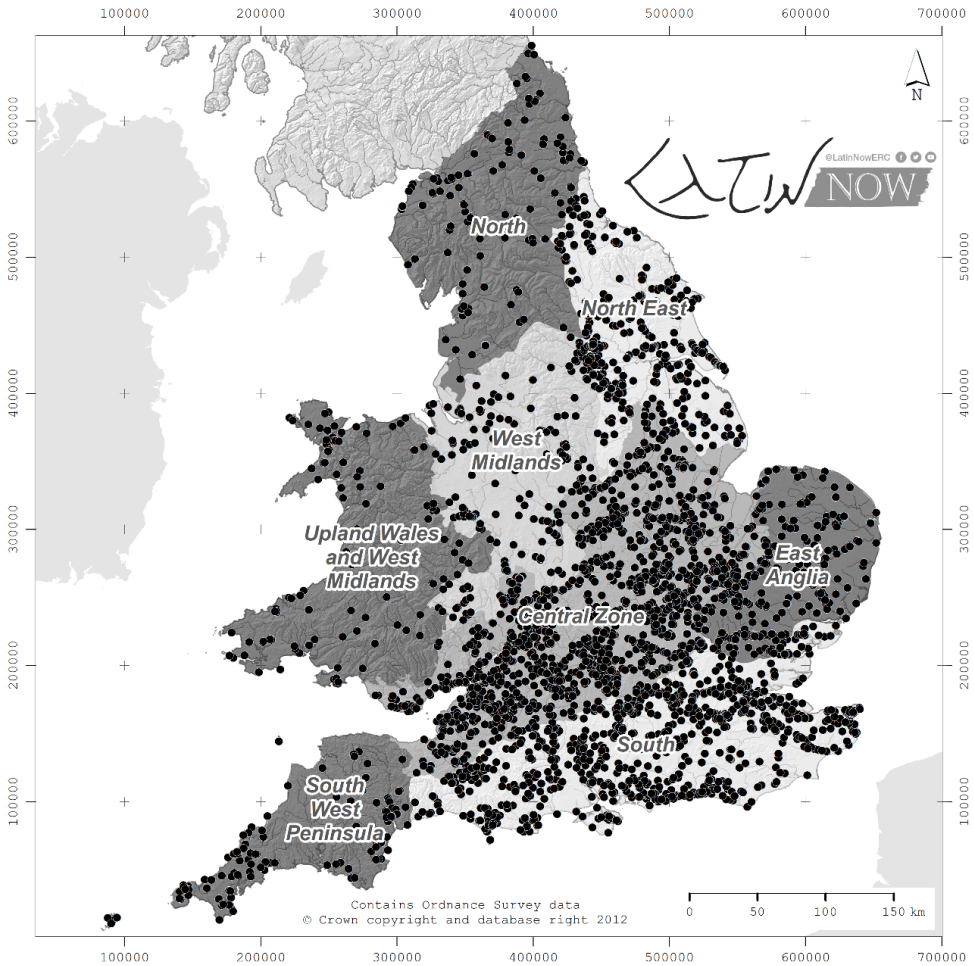


FIGURE 3

Sites and regions in the RSRB project database

The other resource, the RSRB database, collects excavated evidence for rural settlement of Roman Britain from «both traditionally published reports and «grey literature» reports from developer-funded excavations since 1990»⁴¹ (fig. 3). The cut-off for inclusion is December 2014 for England and March 2015 for Wales. Several types of objects from the excavation reports were recorded, including those in the category «writing equipment». For this group of objects the RSRB team collected examples of styli, wax spatulas, seal boxes, wooden tablets and inkwells. Although there are limitations and biases in this dataset, some of which are created by the patchy quality of the reports from which the data were gleaned, «[n]evertheless, given the large sample of sites in the database, the broad patterns in the social and geographical distribution of these objects are likely to be meaningful»⁴².

To our knowledge no one has published detailed analysis of the Roman writing equipment on the PAS database. This resource deserves not just analysis of distribution on the provincial scale, as briefly described in this chapter, but closer assessment of object types and find spots, where available. Some discussion of literacy based on the RSRB project dataset has already been offered: a short section was included in the third volume of *The rural settlement of Roman Britain* in which Brindle drew the following conclusions⁴³. In the core database 490 rural sites had recorded evidence for literacy —both textual remains and writing equipment— which represents c. 13% of the total sites⁴⁴. We can compare this figure to that of 63% of the defended «small towns» (a set of settlements added late on in the project)⁴⁵. Clearly, and unsurprisingly, larger nucleated settlements are much more likely to have literate activity. Within the project's core rural set c. 50% of undefended nucleated roadside settlements, 26% of villas, but only 6% of farmsteads (which make up a large percentage of all rural settlement) provided evidence for literacy⁴⁶. These farmsteads tended to be «complex», for example with rich finds, religious associations or large-scale production (e.g. Orton Hall Farm, Cambridgeshire, where excavators found corndriers and evidence for large-scale brewing, and turned up both styli and a samian ware inkwell, the latter a rare find on rural sites)⁴⁷. Overall, the

⁴¹ archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/romangl/index.cfm (last accessed 10.10.2019).

⁴² Smith *et al.* 2018, 70.

⁴³ Smith *et al.* 2018, 69-77.

⁴⁴ Smith *et al.* 2018, 70.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Smith *et al.* 2018, 70-71.

⁴⁷ Smith *et al.* 2018, 74. For the distribution of samian inkwells in Britain, see Willis 2005. Willis records presence and absence of samian inkwells in assemblages, taking into account sample sizes, which demonstrate their rarity in *Britannia* and their association with military and urban contexts. He also shows the specific environments within these centres which may have produced writing, for example *principia* and *fora*.

results indicated strong correlation between literate activity and roads, higher population, administrative/small-scale market functions and status.

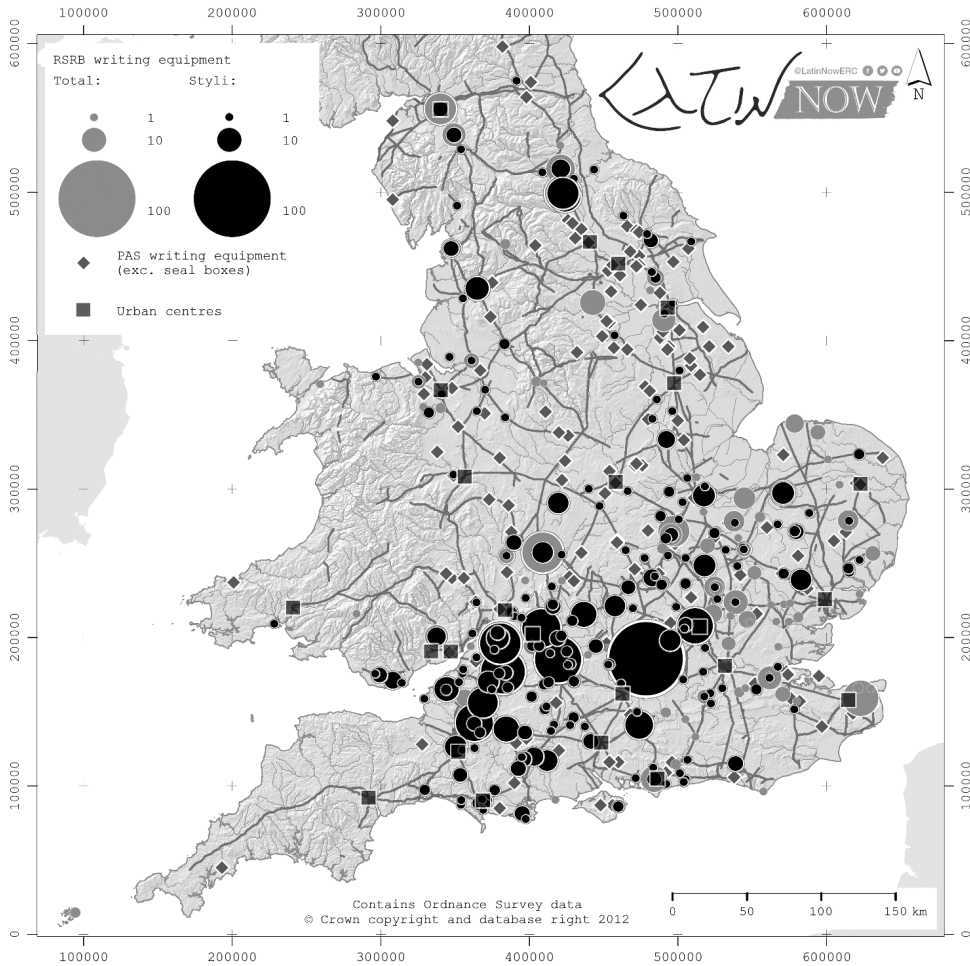


FIGURE 4

Significant Roman urban settlements and roads,
plus finds of writing equipment from PAS (excluding seal boxes)
and RSRB (styli in black, all writing equipment in grey)

Brindle used presence or absence of evidence for writing in his summary rather than assessing the data in terms of numbers of items at each site. By combining the information for writing equipment from the PAS (largely rural finds) and more granular data from RSRB (excavated rural sites and so-called

«small towns») and plotting known urban and military centres, which we know produced evidence of writing equipment, we can, subject to the biases briefly sketched above, begin to provide some flesh for the bones of our vision of the uptake of literacy and Latinization in Roman Britain⁴⁸. This provides a provincial-wide framework in which more detailed socio-literacy analysis can operate, for example, investigations into detailed context/values/types/functions/social dimensions of literacy and their correlations with social factors.

The results reinforce Brindle's conclusions that roads are closely correlated with these developments, as is proximity to urban centres (fig. 4⁴⁹). The PAS finds in particular pick out roads in the central and northern third of the province, where few finds are recorded by RSRB. The effect of military presence on the surrounding rural population is less clear—it seems that this may not have been a major driver of literacy and Latinization in the deeper hinterlands of military installations. Presumably many of the soldiers stationed in these areas are not necessarily engaged in written communication with local rural communities, and are perhaps having a greater impact on the local populations in their homelands, as Derks and Roymans suggested for the Batavian region (the homeland of some of the auxiliary troops based at Vindolanda). Generally speaking it seems that areas with more Roman-period settlement produce more evidence for writing equipment, as we might expect. There are some clear patterns though. Roman rural sites are found, though in admittedly relatively small numbers, in the far south-west of the country and in Wales, but next to no evidence for writing equipment appears in these areas. Conversely, the area of the «M4 corridor» in England, stretching from west of London to the Bristol Channel, essentially the area of the Cotswolds and the Chilterns, seems to have been a particularly active area in terms of literacy. This is an area with plenty of Roman-period settlement and finds, but not necessarily more than, for example, elsewhere in the central zone or south.

There is much still to be done to reveal the social complexities of literacy in *Britannia* using the data from RSRB. Contexts should be firmly scrutinized, for example the taphonomic conditions, size of excavation and details of the full assemblage in which the evidence for literacy was found⁵⁰. But we can already state that the shorthand used by numerous commentators of «rural» literacy starkly opposed to military/urban literacy, is clearly an oversimplification.

⁴⁸ The PAS evidence for seal boxes was also collected and will be considered in another more detailed publication against the patterns for the writing equipment, providing further fuel for the debate over their function (see below, section 6).

⁴⁹ Figure 4 does not show military sites, since the data was already complicated to represent in greyscale. It also does not indicate chronological differentiation of finds and settlements. More detailed analysis with colour maps will be presented at length elsewhere.

⁵⁰ See also Eckardt's exhortation (2014, 205).

There is a substantial difference between an isolated farmhouse with very few finds compared to an opulent villa connected into a road network and with evidence for impressive levels of productive activities. Of the sites with quantifiable finds of writing equipment in the RSRB, the four with the largest numbers of items were: Yewden, Buckinghamshire, a villa, farm and funerary site with corndriers, bathhouse, malting areas and workshop which produced 92 styli⁵¹; Wanborough, Wiltshire, a nucleated roadside settlement/small town with probable *mansio* and evidence for crafting, smithing and a corndrier, which turned up 36 styli and 1 seal box; Nettleton, Wiltshire, a nucleated roadside settlement with a Romano-Celtic temple, shrines, funerary activity, mill, possible *mansio*, and iron and other metal production, which produced 33 styli and 1 seal box; and Kingscote, Gloucestershire, a villa/village with corndrier, quarry, workshop and metal production, which offered 28 styli and 7 seal boxes. All of these «rural» settlements were complex and excavations generated large quantities of finds, including numerous coins. These were undoubtedly, to varying extents, sites of production and exchange which entailed communications and documentation both within and beyond their immediate vicinity (the presence of possible *mansiones* may be particularly significant) and in such contexts use of Latin and literacy was clearly effective⁵².

The evidence from the RSRB might support those who want to consider less pessimistic visions of Romano-British literacy, and Brindle concludes that «in agreement with general current academic opinion, speaking Latin and the ability to read and write (at varying degrees of competency) were probably more widespread in Roman Britain than has traditionally been allowed»⁵³. However, he also notes that the overall figure of 13% of RSRB settlements showing evidence for writing seems nevertheless still relatively low, and our revisions of levels of literacy should not be radical. All commentators of the ancient world must struggle to think through how the remains we collect and assess might correspond to ancient realities. Trying to contextualise this figure is, however, extremely difficult and it must be underlined that 13% does not mean a 13% literacy rate. It should be noted that the vast majority of the textual evidence created has been lost: even apparently commonplace documents are extremely rare. Tomlin gives the example of the military pay sheet which would have been produced three times annually⁵⁴. Between Augustus and Diocletian he estimates at the very least 225 million may have been produced in the Ro-

⁵¹ A site which has generated much press interest due to the 97 perinatal infant burials found during excavations.

⁵² Romans regarded written records as important for the management of large estates, see Woolf 2000, 883.

⁵³ Smith *et al.* 2018, 76.

⁵⁴ Tomlin 2011, 142.

man world, of which only a dozen or so have survived; the army in Britain may have generated around 20 million, of which none survive. Even in the Egyptian conditions which preserve documents well, Hopkins estimates we have roughly 1:12000 census returns⁵⁵. Wooden stylus and ink tablets and styli/other pens, presumably the most common types of writing material in Britain, are not in the former case often preserved and in the latter often not identified even if preserved. In this context Eckardt notes that in fact «official documents such as wax tablets occur in surprising numbers on rural sites, and the biases of preservation on more deeply stratified urban sites may play a bigger role than previously acknowledged»⁵⁶. More work needs to be done in contextualizing both the writing equipment and the epigraphy and exploring how they might help to draw the detailed picture of differential literacy across *Britannia*, which moves away from simplistic notions of rural illiteracy, the straightforwardly Latinizing force of the army and stark percentages of provincial literacy.

6. A SOCIO-LITERACY APPROACH TO *BRITANNIA* AND THE NORTH-WESTERN ROMAN PROVINCES

Literacy in Roman Britain—in crude terms, the proportion of the population who could read and write—cannot be quantified. We can only study it impressionistically, by looking at written documents of all kinds, and wondering who wrote them, and why, and who was likely to read them or be affected by them. (Tomlin 2011, 134⁵⁷)

Tomlin's words are in part directed against our keenness to reach neat numbers for percentages of literates in the provinces. He is right, of course: fighting over numbers—5%, 7%, 10% or 12% literacy—might not get us very far. But we can do more than an impressionistic study. His own commentary on literacy in Britain is grounded in intimate knowledge of the textual remains. As we explore the materials, archaeological and textual, beyond monumental writing and its limited perspective, we require *more*, not less, precision on quantification and context with a view to forming well-justified and documented «visions» of the complexities of literacy and the nature of documentary cultures across the provinces⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ Hopkins 1991, 133, n.2.

⁵⁶ Eckardt 2014, 205.

⁵⁷ See also Tomlin 2018a.

⁵⁸ The desired «quantification» means, for instance, where possible, setting examples of iron writing equipment within the context of total iron assemblage from each site/extent of excavations, and considering type sites with evidence of literacy in the context of number of total sites in each category.



FIGURE 5

Enamelled seal box from Vindolanda, UK, c. AD 122-130⁵⁹.

© Vindolanda Trust

One matter which must be resolved in this detailed contextualization and quantification is the issue of seal boxes and their relationship with literacy (fig. 5). Andrews's careful collection and analysis of seal boxes from Roman Britain and experimental archaeology has led him to argue that seal boxes should not, as most have been in recent decades, be associated with writing equipment (2012). Instead he thinks it is likely they were used in the sealing of material bags such as money purses. Eckardt includes an entire section on seal boxes in her chapter on the artefactual evidence for literacy, whilst admitting that if seal boxes were indeed primarily used in the way Andrews describes, «they are of little use as an indicator of literacy»⁶⁰, so she leaves the issue unresolved. The same approach is taken by Brindle, who cites Andrews's work but nonetheless continues to categorize seal boxes as writing equipment without any specific justification. Since Derk and Roymans's 2002 article was so convincing, it seems we are reluctant to tackle the issue of the functionality of seal boxes. It is quite possible, of course, to argue that seal boxes may be multifunctional and that they could be used both on documents or on bags of valuables, for example⁶¹. But the direct link of these boxes to literacy has been at the very least questioned, so we cannot simply make reference to Andrews's work and carry on as if nothing has changed. A major step must be to extend the detailed

⁵⁹ Catalogue number SF8956.

⁶⁰ Eckardt 2014, 185.

⁶¹ See Derks 2010, 725.

contextual and experimental work that has been carried out on the British seal boxes to those across the provinces to see if there is provincial variation in their use.

Roman literacy is a subject which is difficult to grasp: it feels both pre-modern and familiar⁶². In itself it contains multiple elements: literacies of production, of exchange, of the army and the elite and so on, and being literate entails wildly differing levels of skills in using, and familiarity with, texts⁶³. The evidence for literate activity is, however, partial and enigmatic. Understanding provincial literacy is, nonetheless, a task worth pursuing, not least because it was a core part of the Roman cultural package. But as Horsfall remarks «Tyche has skewered our evidence with malice and thoroughness»⁶⁴. This chapter has presented some of the mess left by Tyche in Britannia and made suggestions about the scope and limitations for further work on provincial writing equipment.

The approach advocated here is to side-step the endless debate over Harris's levels of literacy (he was right that there was no *mass* literacy but the precise levels of literacy across the provinces is ultimately impossible to know) and rather to direct our attention on the *socio*-literacy methodology, namely focusing on social dimensions of literacy. We have seen that literacy correlates neatly with military and urban settlement, and, in rural contexts, roads, production centres, higher population, administrative/small-scale market functions and status were key drivers. Military presence does not seem to be obviously closely related to a spreading of literacy to local communities in *Britannia*: parts of the province with multiple military installations, for example the hinterland of Hadrian's Wall and Wales, do not seem to have been particularly literate beyond the camp walls. The military clearly had a significant effect in spreading literacy, but this may have been for the soldiers themselves, their immediate local interlocutors, their families and homelands, rather than the local hinterlands in which they were stationed. At least this is the picture emerging from the most northerly province. Cross-provincial work will allow us to explore the dynamics of military settlement and other drivers of literacy and their impact across the Roman North-West.

ABBREVIATIONS

CIL = *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, Berlin.

⁶² Woolf 2000, 875.

⁶³ «[A] highly variable package of skills in using texts» (Bowman & Woolf 1994, 2). See now Coltelloni-Trannoy & Moncunill, forthcoming.

⁶⁴ Horsfall 1991, 67.

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