CHAPTER 8

Learning to Read and Write

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Understanding how the Greeks taught their children to read and to write will require following the thread of two somewhat contrary narratives. First, there is the conceptual system of how one goes about learning the art of being literate—often labeled with the Latin term, *ordo docendi* (“the order of teaching”)—a fixed sequence by which the elements of reading and writing are introduced. But, second, it will be important to review what we can see of the actual process of instruction, which, as real-world matters tend to be, turns out to be a considerably messier affair, with an interestingly diverse range of outcomes and goals.

1. Ordo Docendi

The conceptual series that grounded the learning process was a progressive movement from small to larger units: letter, syllable, word, and sentence. The ancient approach to learning the ABCs at first has a comforting familiarity about it. The letters are memorized in order, at least sometimes helped by a chant or song (so in a later time: Jerome, *Ep.* 107.4). Ancient writers mention tactile drills, such as following grooves of the letter shapes in a piece of wood, or fingering letters made out of wood or ivory; using top and bottom guidelines (Figure 8.1), or tracing letters lightly sketched on waxed tablets (Plato, *Prot.* 326d, Quintilian 1.1.27, 5.14.31, 10.2.2, Seneca, *Ep.* 94.51; Muir 1984).

We find scattered in the archaeological record copious evidence of written alphabetic exercises: students practicing their alphas, betas, and gammas wrote them on walls, on wax and wooden tablets, on ostraca (broken bits of pottery: a common scrap writing material in antiquity), and on papyrus (ancient paper). From the many surviving exercises on ostraca and papyri, we also, however, find alphabetic drills that strike us as a bit odd. Students were asked to practice a variety of what has been dubbed “the relentless gymnastics of the alphabet” (Cribiore 2001: 164): writing the alphabet backwards as...
well as forwards; or skipping every second or third letter; or writing first letter, last letter, second letter, second-to-last letter and so forth—analogous to asking our early learners to puzzle out how to write \textit{azbycxdwevfugthsirjqkplomn}.

From even these quick examples, three thematic points arise that will exercise us repeatedly. First, from the ancient perspective, rather monotonous exercises are simply the stuff of disciplined learning; no recourse to Sesame Street is to be envisioned here, but rather an instructor with serious purpose and, if necessary, a stick. Second, and more sympathetically, we must attune ourselves to educational goals that differ from our own. Memory was more valued for its own sake, for example; the task of reading was more challenging—as we will see later—and thus thorough practice in the basics was considered essential. Third, we must not assume facilely that training pre-literate students to read Greek would or should match training in modern Western languages. In this case, there is a discernible method to the seeming madness of these alphabetic gymnastics. Greeks, of course, did not use Arabic numerals, and instead, quite naturally, used the alphabet (with a couple of add-ons) as their means for counting: alpha = 1, beta = 2, gamma = 3. Thus, the mental gymnastics here has to do not only with rote memorization but also with learning to use letters to \textit{calculate}: for a student to practice skipping one or two letters in writing the alphabet is to practice counting by twos or threes—1, 3, 5, 7, 9 or 1, 4, 8—just as any modern early learner might do. (This oversimplifies somewhat—counting in Greek gets more complicated when you get past 10—but the point stands that numeracy in Greek culture required firm, exact control over the location of letters in the alphabetic sequence) (Cribiore 2001: 167).
The next step in learning to read was to command the syllabaries—by which is meant the systematic study of the possible syllables. In English terms, the equivalent would be practicing by chant and writing *ba* *be* *bi* *bo* *bu*, *ca* *ce* *ci* *co* *cu*, *da* *de* *di* *do* *du*, etc.; followed by *bab*, *beb*, *bib*, *bob*, *bub*, *cac*, *cec*, *cic*, *coc*, *cuc*, etc.; and so on. This too will strike modern educators as tedious and odd, though historians of education will know that in English, too, syllabaries were a standard part of learning to read up into the nineteenth century. In Greek, use of syllabaries as an essential component in learning to read shows up as early as we can see. An incised abcedarium with syllabary survives from Etruria from the late seventh century BCE (see Johnson 2011: 452), shortly after the adaptation of the Greek script for Etruscan, and not so long after the invention of the Greek alphabet itself (of disputed date, but commonly assigned to the ninth century BCE). The fifth-century BC comedian Kallias wrote a curious play, the *Alphabet Show*, whose chorus were “women in pairs that kept rhythm together and sang in the following way: “Beta alpha *ba*, Beta *ei* [i.e. epsilon] *be*, Beta *eta* *bē*, Beta *iota* *bi*, Beta *omicron* *bo*, Beta *upsilon* *bu*, Beta *omega* *bō,“ and again in a strophe that matches in its song and rhythm, “gamma *alpha*, gamma *eta*, gamma *iota*, gamma *omicron*, gamma *upsilon*, gamma *upsilon*,“ and likewise for the rest of the syllables one by one …. (Athenaeus, *Deipnosoph*, 10.453.d). This alludes comically to the singsong chants employed by students in learning the syllabic combinations. Actual examples make clear that in addition to biliteral combinations (*ba*, *be*, *bē*, *bi*, *bo*, *bu*, *bō*), triliteral (such as *bra*, *bre*, etc., or *bar*, *ber*, etc.) and even quadriliteral exercises (*bras*, *bres*, etc.) came into play; the earliest example is a fourth-century BC ostrakon (IG II² 2784; Johnson 2011: 446). The syllabary section of a schoolteacher’s handbook on papyrus from the third century BCE (Guéraud 1938) starts with two-letter combinations, followed by selected triliteral and quadriliteral syllables, encompassing several columns and, no doubt, a great deal of time and effort on the part of the students.

Again, then, we see the characteristic movement from simple unit to the more complex, with a steady focus on the rote, the systematic drill. Extant written attempts by students transcribing syllabaries exhibit clumsy letter forms suggesting, as one would expect, that syllabaries formed an early part of reading education (Cribiore 1996), and emphasis in the sources on thorough memorizing of the syllables is common. Here are two illustrative remarks, the first Greek and the second Roman:

1. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (first c. BCE): “When we are taught to read, first we learn by heart the names of the letters, then their shapes and their values, then, in the same way, the syllables and their effects, and finally words and their properties …. And when we have acquired knowledge of these things, we begin to write and read, syllable by syllable and slowly at first.” (*de Comp. Verb.* 25 fin., trans. Usher).

2. Quintilian (first c. CE): “No short-cut is possible with regard to the syllables. They must all be memorized thoroughly and there must be no putting off the most difficult of them, as is commonly done, since that leads to an unpleasant surprise when the student needs to spell the words” (*Inst. Or.* 1.1.30). We do not know how long a student might work on the alphabet and syllabaries—our only direct evidence is Plato’s recommendation of three years for a student to “learn the letters” (*Laws* 7.809c)—but that it was a fairly long time is certain.

This enthusiasm for what seem to us mind-numbing rote exercises must be set alongside different goals and a different reading environment, as already remarked. In the case of syllabaries, there are three ways by which we can understand these drills as
foundational training, consistent with ancient perspectives and contexts (Johnson 2011: 457–460). (1) **Systematic exercise in common alphabetic combinations.** For the student still hesitant in translating the alphabetic characters to sound, practice with syllabaries allows quick repetition of the elements in an unchallenging context. Reading *ba be bi bo bu ca ce ci co du di do du* allows the student to drill rather than to sound out or think through, and makes the translation of syllable to sound an automatic reflex. In many ways, this procedure is analogous to practicing scales on a musical instrument, a tedious drill that also continues to be recognized as foundational to mastery of an instrument. (2) **Phonological training and elocution.** Rhetoric was an important part of education in the ancient world—one of the twin goals (alongside philosophy) for higher elite education—and an essential part of the practice with syllables was proper articulation, the fostering of a clear, distinct manner of speaking appropriate to the educated class. This was quintessential to public speaking, of course, but in a more general way the trained ability to read aloud to one’s peers in an educated manner was important to reading in Greece, as among elites in most pre-modern societies (Johnson 2010, esp. 26–31). There is ancient evidence that teachers over a wide range of time were focused on this: Manuzius (c. 1500 AD) brings out what is already implicit in Quintilian (*Inst. Or.* 1.5.6) when he says that schoolboys need to learn well the syllables so as not to commit barbarisms in writing and speaking; specifically, he writes, the boy well trained in syllables “will neither spell nor pronounce *caelli caellorum*, or *allius allia alliud* with a double ‐l‐ as many are accustomed to do, nor will he put two consonants where there should be only one, nor one where there are two” (see Johnson 2011: 459). Jerome (*Ep.* 107.4, fourth c. CE) in advising on the early education of girls bluntly declares: “The very sound of the letters, and thus also the first lesson in them, comes out differently from the lips of an educated man, and that of a rustic.” (3) **Reading by groups of letters.** A less obvious benefit of studying syllabaries is that it accustomed pre‐literate readers to seeing the shapes of the letter groups for each syllable. Greek literary texts were written without word breaks, in a continuous stream of letters (known as *scriptio continua*; also characteristic of Roman texts from the first century onward), which made learning to read more challenging. In that context, thorough training in being able to see clearly the contours of the syllables was an important first step in distinguishing the words from one another. Moreover, in ancient Greek many of the syllables are morphemically determining, that is, many of the one‐ or two‐syllable groups are prefixes, suffixes, or word roots that deliver meaning. For example, in the Greek word *ape‐grafe‐to* (“he had something written out”), each element has meaning: *ape*‐ means “out”, with an augment that indicates past tense, *grafe*‐ is the word root, meaning “write”, ‐*to* is the ending, indicating that he had it done. The ability to pick out instantly the syllables—and often thus also the morphemes—from the undifferentiated stream of letters was an essential part of learning to read *scriptio continua* fluidly (Figure 8.2).

As one might expect, the next step in the *ordo docendi* is to study individual words. Here, too, the exercise is systematically organized so as to move from simple to more complex, beginning with monosyllabic words, then disyllabic, and working up to words of four or five syllables (as we see in two extant school handbooks: Collart 1936; Géraud‐Jouguet 1938) (Figure 8.3). Multisyllabic words have the syllable divisions marked, from which we infer that these lists can be used for further syllabary practice. Almost predictably, there are aspects of these lists that strike us as odd. The one‐syllable words contain
not only common words like *mus* (mouse) and *nous* (mind) but *rôks* (ῥῶξ), a word of some obscurity that occurs once only, in the *Odyssey*, and *ksar* (ξάρ), a word otherwise unknown (examples from *P.Bour. I=Collart*, 1936). The monosyllabic lists contain also an unusual number of words that are not entirely rare, but full of consonant clusters: *lungks* (λύγξ, lynx), *stran(gks)* (στράγξ, drop), *klangks* (κλάγξ, howl), *klôps* (κλώψ, thief), *knaks* (κνάξ, itch). For multisyllabic words, too, there is a tendency toward words that are uncommon or hard to pronounce, and also with a strong emphasis on mythological and other proper names from literary sources. The emphasis on words difficult to pronounce matches our earlier observation that elocution was an important consideration.
in learning to read. The tendency went to the extent of schoolmasters having their students memorize and practice bizarre artificial words like knakszbich (κναξζβίχ) and zhuchthedon (ζβυχθηδόν). (These are sometimes claimed as medical terms, following a remark in Clement, but they are in any case otherwise unexampled consonantal sequences for ancient Greek.) The importance of such pronunciation exercises is remarked in literary sources as well: Clement of Alexandria speaks to this (Strom. 5.8.48–9) as does Quintilian (1.1.37), who calls these sequences by the Greek chalinoi, “bridles”—exercises designed, that is, to tame and train the tongue. The emphasis on proper names from high literature is also consistent with the world view that is gradually becoming apparent to us: not only do such names familiarize the student with cultural icons of the glorious Greek past, but, importantly, they signal the goal of the system, which is designed as the first steps toward becoming truly educated. Under elite tutelage, the study of words could be surprisingly involved: Dionysius of Halicarnassus advises that before learning to read the student work with word lists to learn “the parts of speech—I mean nouns, verbs, conjunctions, and the properties of these—the shortening and lengthening of syllables, the high and low pitch of accents, the genders, cases, numbers, moods, and countless other related things” (Dem. 52, trans. after Ushner). This was not, that is, a system geared toward functional literacy, or indeed literacy easily or quickly gained.

Logically, one might expect the next step to be exercises with clauses or very short sentences. The latter is sometimes found: one surviving tablet preserves, for example, “The learning of letters is the beginning of wisdom”; and single line verses from Menander and brief moralistic aphorisms in prose seem to have become common, at least from the second century onward. But often, whether instead or in addition, the habit was to introduce snippets or even entire passages from authors like Homer or Euripides, which were written in verse and in an antiquated Greek that was undoubtedly very challenging for early students—much like introducing our emerging readers immediately to Chaucer and Shakespeare. Papyrus evidence shows that word divisions would be marked to help the young students, at least at first (recall that literary texts would normally have no word separation). This immediate turn to high literature remains, however, a remarkable circumstance, one that confounded earlier historians of education (e.g., Marrou 1956: 153–154). In recent years, though, scholars have come to understand that these longer maxims and short passages were more likely used for writing exercises (Cribiore 1996), or for reading in the sense of material for pronunciation and phrasing exercises. Christians may recall how opaque the Nicene Creed was when memorized as a young child; for Jewish children the significance of the texts read and sung at the annual Seder becomes understandable only gradually; and other religions have much the same sorts of rote training for central but difficult texts. So, too, in Greece it appears that children were practicing handwriting and elocution using verses that they could not fully understand, but that nonetheless conveyed the sense of an impressive literary culture inhabited by quintessentially Greek gods and heroes and historical figures of consequence.

This, then, was the conceptual system, and qua system it was remarkably stable over time and place. As we have seen, critical elements of the ordo show up in the earliest sources we can reasonably expect to have. By Hellenistic times if not before, the entirety of this conceptual system was firmly in place, and this constituted the system adopted by Roman educators as well. Indeed, we now know that the basic contour of the system—alphabet,
syllabaries, word lists by syllable count, maxims and/or poetic passages—is characteristic of Latin and Greek education through the Middle Ages, and of early modern education throughout Europe from England to Russia (Johnson 2011); indeed this Western notion of the ordo for early reading education came under the pressure of reform only in the early nineteenth century. The following chart demonstrates the striking similarity of the contents of the third-century BCE schoolmaster’s handbook we have cited before (Guéraud 1938) and Webster’s “ole blue-back,” the reading primer that sold 100 million copies and dominated instruction in the United States up until the last century (from Johnson 2011):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Webster’s Ole Blue-Back, United States (1783, rev. ed. 1831)</th>
<th>Schoolmaster’s Text from Egypt (third c. BCE)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Word lists: 1-syllable words, 2-syllable words, 3-syllable words, 4-syllable words; difficult or irregular monosyllables.</td>
<td>3. Word lists: 1-syllable words, 2-syllable words, 3-syllable words, 4-syllable words, 5-syllable words. These occur in successive columns at the left with thematic word lists interspersed at the right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Moralistic reading materials.</td>
<td>4. Thematic word lists interspersed within the syllabic word lists: names of months, of divinities, of rivers (etc.).</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Thematic word lists (grouped by category) interspersed with simple reading matter, usually of a moralizing nature; lists of names.</td>
<td>5. Poetic anthology, at first with the syllables boundaries marked.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Older histories of education have left the story more or less so (Marrou 1956; Bonner 1977). But the emphasis on this skeletal sequence we call the ordo docendi obscures the real-world situation in important ways, and it is to the many complexities teased out by more recent scholarship that we now turn (esp. Cribiore 2001; Morgan 1998).

2. Elementary Schooling in Antiquity: Actuality versus Model

We have lots of bits of evidence that add up to a reasonably coherent view of the ways students actually learned to read and write, even if, as already remarked, these real-world situations are considerably more messy than the tidy sequence that the ordo implies. Chapter 9 will examine in some detail the institutional environments in which learning took place, but we need here to register immediately some crucial differences in the very notion of schooling. First is the importance of the home. Our elite literary sources tell us about private tutors for the wealthy, and elite sources are echoed by letters surviving on papyri in suggesting that students might attend a particular master, sometimes remote
from home—and study with a master might include early education (see examples collected in Joyal et al. 2009: 179–183). We also have evidence—though very scattered—of occasional institutions, always in cities, that seem to resemble our notion of a “public school” (Harris 1989: 130–133; Joyal et al. 2009: 134–140, 183–185). But it is a fair assumption that for non-elite, learning to read and write often happened under the tutelage of parents or others in the home or local community who knew something about the learning of letters, and that this might well be less focused and sustained than the literary education envisioned under the ordo. This observation raises the interesting question of why non-elite might be interested in basic literacy, which we will tackle in a moment; but the central point here is that much of the learning of letters was undoubtedly in-house, using a “teacher” who was a family member or friend, who simply mimicked whatever methods he or she had experienced as a child; that the procedure might be far less than formal or thorough; and that the outcome might be limited.

Even for those lucky enough to study with someone formally designated a teacher, there is good evidence that the environment was considerably more chaotic than anything many of us are directly familiar with. Commonly cited is an interesting late source that gives us the most detailed depiction of a “classroom” that we have from antiquity (what survives is from the medieval period, but the scene seems to go back to at least the early third century CE). A schoolboy reports on his day, and part of that reads:

I go to school. I enter and I say, “Good morning, teacher.” He gives me a kiss and says hello to me. My slave gives me the tablets, the writing case; I take out the stylus and sit down at my place: I erase and copy according to the model. Afterwards I show my writing to the teacher, who makes every kind of correction. He asks me to read and then I give the text to another pupil; I learn the sayings and I recite them. “Give me dictation,” I ask. Another student dictates to me … When the teacher bids them, the little ones engage in letters and syllables, and one of the older students pronounces these aloud for them. Others recite in order the words to the assistant teacher and write verses. Being in the first group, I take a dictation. Then, after sitting down, I study commentaries, glosses, and the handbook of grammar. *Corpus Glossiorum Latinorum* iii 639–640, 646 (trans. Cribiore 2001: 15)

There are many details of interest here: the scene is busy and noisy, with many students practicing out-loud drills at once even while others sit and study; there seem to be no writing desks (note that only after writing what is dictated does the student sit down); “primary” and “secondary” students work in the same classroom; instruction is divided among teacher, assistant teacher, older students, even peers. The scene is reminiscent of the pioneer classroom of nineteenth-century America (Cribiore 2001: 17), or of schoolhouses in rural China today, and offers a firm corrective to anachronistic mental pictures of what a “school” might mean. We have good reason to believe that this image is not so different from what we might find in earlier antiquity as well. Quintilian in the first century gives a briefer depiction of teacher–student interactions that seems of a piece with this one (1.2.11; Johnson 2010: 30). Moreover, not all “schools” were even this ordered. Schooling that took place outside under porticos was commonplace: in the second century, Martial, for instance, complains of schoolmasters who disturb his sleep by causing too much street noise before first light (*Ep. 9.68*). Cribiore (2001: 135, figures 10 and 17; cf. pp. 21–28) rightly points to “schools” in present-day Egypt and Africa that work in much the same way, where
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teachers work with students at disparate educational levels under shaded outdoor spaces off noisy city streets. From Hellenistic Alexandria, we have a crudely comic literary depiction of a schoolboy who does not yet know his syllables (“he does not know enough to repeat the alpha part of the syllabary unless someone shouts it at him five times”), and yet in the same classroom he is also busy practicing (again with little success) recitation of speeches from tragedy (Herodas, Mimes 3.22–36); the parents try to be involved in helping with the schooling (24–26, 37–38) but the teacher’s solution is to beat the boy into submission—he will use a bull’s-tail whip to make the boy “better behaved than a girl” (66ff).

From such examples, we take away the vivid sense of a schooling that was not often so orderly, and considerably more dependent on an individual teacher, than our literary elite sources might have us imagine. The evidence from papyri of written school exercises becomes interesting, then, in several directions. First, and importantly, the written exercises in broad sketch match the elements described by the ordo: abcedaria, syllabaries, word lists, and model verses are all amply in evidence (see catalog in Cribiore 1996), and we can readily imagine these are but the few written examples to survive from what was an industry of rote drilling, often (as we have seen) oral: thus, for example, the relatively fewer syllabaries on papyrus are witness not to lack of use (pace Morgan 1998: 56, 70), but more probably evidence that syllabary drills were more commonly executed out-loud or on wax tablets, just as our literary sources suggest. In general, then, we find considerable substantiation for the notion that learning to read and write made use of these time-honored elements. Indeed, given the relative informality of the schooling, and the dominance of tradition within ancient society, it seems unavoidable that the “natural” way to teach someone how to read would be to use the elements by which one was taught oneself. Along these lines, it is worth a slight detour to remark that the basics of the ordo itself—that progression from character to syllable to word list to sayings—has intriguing parallels in the near-Eastern tradition of scribal instruction, a tradition that goes back well into the second millennium BCE (Veldhuis 1997; Johnson 2011).

Yet the papyri give counter indications as well. Cribiore’s painstaking study of the school exercises (1996) has revealed the interesting fact that students were made to copy short texts, such as aphorisms or single-line verses—texts that they may well have memorized for recitation—without being able to understand what they were writing. The great number and types of errors made in this type of copying, as well as the sometimes extreme uncertainty in forming the letters, are consistent with what Cribiore (2001: 169) calls the “passive dependence on a model,” a letter-by-letter copying exercise for students without the ability to read. This evidence is important not simply because it calls into question the fixed sequence described by ancient theorists, but also because it suggests a divergence between the goals as well as the process of learning to read and learning to write. Penmanship and the simple ability to copy had considerable value in and of themselves. The papyri also reveal one other bit of evidence that is crucial for our understanding: advanced written exercises—that is, advanced rhetorical and other exercises that would form the subject matter past the grammarian’s curriculum (see Chapter 10)—are, in fact, rather few, relative to the elementary ones. That is, exactly the sort of exercise one might most expect to survive on papyrus is relatively rare. As Morgan (1998: 50–52, 64–65) suggests, this seems a
fairly firm indication that most students, especially those outside major cities, did not advance past the elementary learning of letters.

All this brings us to the interesting—and rather urgent—question of the motivation to acquire elementary literacy in antiquity. Antiquity had, of course, very different ideas about literacy: no one seriously advocated universal literacy, idealistic philosophers aside; public schools seem to have been the exception rather than the rule, and were certainly not an expectation of the state; education itself, as already mentioned, was oriented towards liberal arts—knowledge of poetry, training in philosophy and rhetoric. For the elite, literacy was fundamental to belonging among “the educated” (oi pepaideumenoi), which in many cosmopolitan settings largely overlapped with the ruling class (broadly on this topic, Johnson 2010); and this could extend to elite women and to the elite entourage more generally, including favored servants. But for the non-elite, the situation is less clear. There seems to have been little or no shame for a non-elite not to know how to read, and use of intermediaries was widespread (Youtie 1971, 1975; Harris 1989: 33–35, 144–145)—for legal matters, the local scribe or a kinsman could help, and for public inscriptions it was necessary only that someone read aloud for those who could not. It is folly to try to attach percentages (pace Harris 1989), but the papyri alone suggest that a substantial number and range of people would have learned the rudiments of reading and writing, at least to the point of being able to write their own names, and would have been able to read if to a limited extent, to control basic numeracy (counting), and to know some of the aphoristic materials common to Greek culture. To what end did they do this?

The obvious answer to this question is that the goals were various, but let us flesh that out a bit. Of course, laying claim to Greek identity—bound tightly with the literary heritage—was an important goal for many, especially the large number of Greeks who lived not in Greece but around the Mediterranean (in the wake of Alexander’s conquests in the fourth century BCE and the conquest of Greece by Rome in the second). But limited literacy could also be directly useful in a variety of real-world situations. We find evidence of schools that seem to have functional literacy as their end. Horace, for example, writing in a Roman context in the first century BCE, assumes that his readers will understand the difference latent in his father’s critical choice not to send him to study alongside the “sons of great centurions” but rather to Rome, “to be taught those studies which any equestrian or senator would teach his own” (Hor., Sat. 1.71–78). Some teachers, that is, focused on the sort of literacy requisite for logistical operations at middle and upper levels of the military (Harris 1989: 166–167) rather than on a path oriented toward literary studies. This “centurion’s literacy” need not have been very advanced: necessary was only being able to set the password, issue formulaic orders, write brief (and, again, formulaic) letters, and that limitation is visible in the documents excavated at the Roman garrison at Vindolanda despite an impressive range of different writers (Bowman 2003). Something like the centurion’s choice—a basic schooling inadequate as training for a future poet—would have been suitable for non-elites who aimed at middle-level posts in the military or government, and this was as true of the Hellenistic as of the Roman period. Moreover, elementary schooling could be foundational for a variety of trained apprenticeships. This could include scribes, of course: we have a papyrus document from the second century that shows us how such an apprenticeship was set up
(POxy 724; cf. Cologne papyrus inv. 164), and there is some evidence of larger scribal training shops as well (Cribiore 2001: 182–183). But this could also include workers who made more limited use of reading, writing, and numeracy, such as bankers, merchants, traders, and certain artisans—that plurality of different, often limited “literacies” so characteristic of the ancient world (Thomas 2009). Greg Woolf (2009: 57–58) has recently pointed, for example, to the sort of highly specialized “literacy” required of those who traded in olive oil: ancient storage jars for olive oil had curiously abbreviated stamps that were unintelligible outside the industry, designating critical data like weight, origin, and the names of those doing the checking; such traders might also need to be numerate to handle accounts. One can well imagine that these merchants as a matter of course began with traditional elementary reading and writing instruction before being trained to full “literacy” in the specialty task; and yet it is also probable that most such traders were not “literate” in the sense of being competent to read a book roll containing Plato or Sophocles, and perhaps not even so much as to be able to write and read a brief letter. The demands on such a reader were tightly circumscribed. Learning to read and write was, in short, preliminary education with a wide spectrum of possible outcomes, including as an end in itself, and often, probably usually, it did not function as “primary” schooling looking toward “secondary” education in a school setting.

I end with one of the most illuminating examples of how differently literacy—both its practice and aspirations—played out in antiquity. This is the story of Petaus, son of Petaus, of the village Ptolemais Hormou in Graeco-Roman Egypt, a much-cited example first brought to notice by the distinguished Michigan papyrologist Herbert Youtie (1966). Petaus held the position of the village clerk (kommogrammateus), yet we have from the sands of Egypt several documents that show his subscription in surprisingly clumsy, uncertain lettering. The phenomenon of a village clerk who is not fully in command of his letters, or even described as an illiterate, is known from elsewhere (e.g., the clerk Ischyron of Tamauis: P. Petaus 11), but in the case of Petaus we have a sheet on which he practices his subscription. In painfully executed letters, he copies the subscription formula, “I Petaus, village clerk, have submitted [this document],” one line after the other. On the fifth line of this worksheet he mistakenly leaves out a letter in the verb, yet continues to copy the—now garbled—subscription seven more times (P.Petaus 121). What is doubly interesting is that this Petaus had a brother, Theon, who could competently write out the entirety of a loan contract that he and his brother shared (P.Petaus 31). The example has, then, a double fascination. First, it shows how even an official with the title “clerk” could function by using his very limited competency in letters and depending on the scribal staff. Limited literacy had, ironically, a broader functionality, since, as mentioned, society had a variety of mechanisms by which those who were less literate could get along, including in rather advanced positions—Petaus, note, did not suffer financially or socially from his learning deficiency. Second, though, it shows how very different the educational outcomes could be even for two brothers from the same, moderately wealthy family (Cribiore 2001: 172). In learning to read and write, there seems to be not only a wide range in the goals and formality of instruction, but also considerably more dependence on individual persistence and motivation than on the state or societal pressures typical of our modern era.
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