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International Congress Women and Writing in the Roman West

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa

21st & 22nd November 2024

During the last years, literacy and the use of writing in Roman society have been one of the recurring themes in the Sciences of Antiquity. The classic work of W.V. Harris on Ancient Literacy has the undeniable merit of opening the discussion and raising a first methodological approach. However, his quantitative vision, focused on obtaining literacy rates, and the resultant minimalist estimations, still considerably influences not only the academic conception but also the general public. However, progressively there has been a methodological and theoretical renovation on the matter. Thus, traditionally neglected elements of the documentary and material record have now been valued, such as texts from the private sphere or writing instruments, while, at the interpretative level, more attention is paid to issues such as the intermediate spaces that would exist between total illiteracy or full reading-writing competence (sometimes mentioned by contemporary sources, such as the *bradeos graphontes*), the concept of 'written culture' or the access to education.

If the study and understanding of literacy is difficult given the disappearance of most of the testimonies that originally existed, the handicap is greater if we try to approach women's reality. The gender bias that affects all kinds of ancient sources causes the information on the use of writing by that half of the population to be considerably lower. Again, a pessimistic idea prevails, still very dependent on the vision transmitted by literary sources, in which only a few women from the upper strata of Roman society would have the opportunity to be familiar with writing.

Without denying the gender differences in literacy (actually common to all pre-modern societies), the truth is that in recent years we have had an increase in the testimonies revealing a greater participation of women in Roman written culture and, especially, in the aforementioned intermediate spaces. Private documents have been the most fruitful in this sense, by providing evidence of texts directly produced by women. A particularly interesting example comes from Vindolanda: the final part of a letter written on a wooden tablet from the late s. II A.D. In it, Claudia Severa, wife of a Roman officer, invited her friend Sulpicia Lepidina to her birthday party. These types of complex texts, made by women and direct and incontestable evidence of their literacy, are certainly rare. However, the analysis of the *instrumentum inscriptum* reveals a high percentage of female names that, although they cannot be used to determine the literacy degree of their authors, if considered together with other testimonies indicate the participation of women in Roman written culture in its broadest sense, either as recipients or generators of texts. Spindle whorls constitute a good sample button, an instrument linked to a feminine activity such as spinning, and many of which carry inscriptions. The texts, which range from erotic messages to allusions to spinning and are occasionally written in local languages, clearly had a female audience.

In this sense, if there is a growing impression that writing played a determining role in the daily life of the Roman Empire, female involvement in that written culture is also being increasingly valued. Two very different categories of texts may illustrate this complex and somewhat elusive reality for today's researchers: the public-displayed inscriptions and the administrative documentation. Regarding the former, they present a clear socioeconomic bias in favour of those able to afford the *tituli*. All in all, studies such as those by E. Hemelrijk or M. Navarro Caballero have highlighted the importance of women as issuers or recipients of these inscriptions, contributing, sometimes decisively, to building their cities' epigraphic cultures. Regarding administrative and accounting documents, the increasing publication of papyri and ostraka reveals a quotidian life in which many women had to use writing for commerce, paying taxes, or resolving disputes. This does not imply, neither for men nor for women, that it was necessary to be fully literate to participate in these activities,

but for a considerable part of the population writing was not something strange and they would have possessed a limited but sufficient skill to perform in these tasks.

Archaeology has not been unconnected to this debate, with a growing interest in writing instruments, as shown by the recent monographs by A. Willi or H. Eckardt. To the correct identification of the *instrumenta scriptoria* we have to add their contextualization in burials, surprisingly with a considerable percentage belonging to women. All this without forgetting a still recent line of research such as the representation of these instruments in iconographic sources, in many cases directly linked to women as shown in the well-known Pompeian paintings.

For the first time, the international conference **Women and Writing in the Roman West** will bring together all this theoretical and methodological renewal, co-organized by the project *Escritura Cotidiana. Alfabetización, Contacto Cultural y Transformación Social en Hispania Citerior* of the University of Zaragoza and *UNIARQ-Centro de Arqueologia da Universidade de Lisboa* with the collaboration of the *Grupo de investigación Hiberus*, the *Instituto de Patrimonio Histórico de la Universidad de Zaragoza* and the *Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia*. The congress aims to analyse the female use of writing and the participation of women in the different manifestations of the written culture of the Roman West. We aspire to create a multidisciplinary forum, open to researchers who work from different perspectives such as Ancient History, Archaeology, Gender Studies, Philology, or Epigraphy. Always taking into consideration the set of literary, archaeological, and epigraphic sources, among the proposed topics are:

- Epigraphy and female self-representation
- Writing and women in iconography
- Woman and poetry: the *carmina latina epigraphica*
- Female literacy in Rome and the provinces
- Female literacy in Paleo-European epigraphic cultures
- Comparative studies with other contemporary spaces

In addition to a series of invited conferences, the congress is open to 20-minute communications in face-to-face mode. We invite those interested in participating to send a proposal (no more than 300 words) together with a short biographical note to womenandwritingcongress@gmail.com before May 1st, 2024. We accept proposals in English, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, French, and German. The congress will be held on November 21st and 22nd at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Lisbon. For more information, you can write to the email address or directly to the organizers.

Organizers

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Select Bibliography

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