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“Illiteracy – Conclusions from the Papyri and Other Objects from the Greco-Roman World”

(Thomas J. Kraus)

Abstract:

Documentary papyri from Greco-Roman Egypt allow us many specific insights into the world of common people in the days of Greek and, above all, Roman rule in Egypt. Interestingly, these papyri enable us to reconstruct significant features of education, status, and the skills of reading and writing.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the documents offer peculiar and sometimes even astonishing details about the literacy or illiteracy of particular people.<sup>2</sup> Although documentary papyri form the great majority of textual witnesses from ancient Egypt, there are other artefacts that can serve as evidence for painting the picture of (il)literacy in Greco-Roman Egypt more colourfully.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I intend (a) to provide a brief survey of what is known from the documentary papyri, (b) to demonstrate the benefit from a palaeographical investigation into certain literary and semi-literary papyri for the research field of education and (il)literacy, and (c) to exemplify the use of archaeological objects – other than papyri<sup>4</sup> – with writing on them. A selection of example cases from categories (b) and (c) will help to visualize what these can tell us about (il)literacy in the Greco-Roman world and how they add up to what the documentary papyri manifest.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf., among the considerable number of relevant publications, W.V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge/MA-London: Harvard University Press, 1989); R. Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (ASP 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996); *eadem*, *Gymnastics of the Mind. Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, T.J. Kraus, ‘(Il)literacy in Non-literary Papyri from Graeco-Roman Egypt: Further Aspects to the Educational Ideal in Ancient Literary Sources and Modern Times’, *Mnemosyne* 53 (2000) 322-342, and, with *Addenda*, in *idem*, *Ad Fontes: Original Manuscripts and Their Significance for Studying Early Christianity. Selected Essays* (Texts and Editions for New Testament Study 3; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 107-129.

<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, documentary papyri provide the best and most obvious information about (il)literacy, because the issue of (il)literacy is directly addressed. Consequently, Raffaella Cribiore based her recent article in *The Handbook of Papyrology* on documents ‘Education in the Papyri’, in: R.S. Bagnall [ed.], *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 320-337.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. T.J. Kraus, ‘“Pergament oder Papyrus?” Anmerkungen zur Signifikanz des Beschreibstoffes bei der Behandlung von Manuskripten’, *NTS* 49 (2003) 425-432, and in English, with *Addenda*, in *idem*, *Ad Fontes* (see n. 2), 13-24.