



PROJECT MUSE®

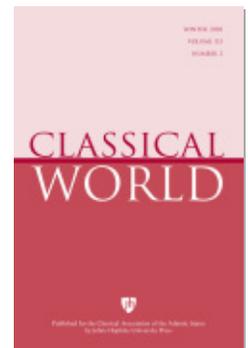
*Writing and Power in the Roman World: Literacies and
Material Culture* by Hella Eckardt (review)

Joseph A. Howley

Classical World, Volume 113, Number 2, Winter 2020, pp. 226-227 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2020.0008>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/749680>

classical past,” as noted by Martin Rubin in his review of this book (“How Togas and Bikinis Meet in California,” *Washington Times*, August 14th 2016).

But there are still more examples that Holliday has missed, such as the Courthouse Building in Santa Barbara, which I discovered has not only a translation from Varro, *De agri cultura* 3.1 in Spanish, “Dios nos dio los campos. El arte humana edificó ciudades,” placed on a Roman style arch at the entrance of the building, but also a quote from Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.620, *discite iustitiam moniti*, above the door of the jail wing. An amusing contemporary account of the placement of this inscription, a veritable comedy of spelling and translation errors, exists. According to “The Casual Observer,” *The Lompoc Review* (July 17th 1928) 2 col. 3:

Members of the Board of Supervisors in a moment of dignity conceived the thought of a Latin inscription over the new county jail, and the quotation *Discite Iustitiam Moniti* which means “let this be a lesson to you” was carved in letters an inch deep into the stone. The engraver, however, happened to be a poor speller and a “C” was carved where “T” should have been. To make the correction the spot had to be cemented over and new letters carved.

The book has been beautifully illustrated and well edited, but if there is to be a paperback edition some corrections should be made: on 439 “Lostusland” should read as “Lotus Land;” the name “Gayelord” on 325 is spelled “Gaylord” in the index on 436; the entry in the index for “Lummis, Charles Fletcher” on 439 is linked to 192, but his name actually appears in the text on 193. In addition, several important names are missing from the index, such as Conrad Hilton and George Boldt.

Professor Holliday’s study will thoroughly enrich readers’ understanding of California’s past, but it will also force them to consider the state’s present predicaments. California is now in many ways an “Arcadia lost,” afflicted by 21st-century urban sprawl and the almost continuous environmental cycles of death-wielding drought, flooding, and wildfire.

MICHELE VALERIE RONNICK
Wayne State University

Hella Eckardt. *Writing and Power in the Roman World: Literacies and Material Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xvi, 268. \$99.99. ISBN 978-1-108-41805-8.

The survival of so much written literature defines Roman studies, but much of the infrastructure of ancient reading and writing eludes us in the material record, where organic matter like papyrus, wooden tablets, and reed pens only survive in unique conditions. It is fortuitous, then, that so many Roman inkwells—the *sine qua non* of writing with ink—were made of ceramic and metal. Until now, there has been no easy reference work, let alone an introduction, to the Roman inkwell. This volume is a welcome remedy to this situation, introducing its reader to these objects, summarizing capably the state of the art of their

excavation and study, and raising a number of questions about their significance for our understanding of literate activity in the Roman world.

As often with books, the title may set its reader up for disappointment. Readers hoping for a comprehensive (and long overdue) update to W. V. Harris's *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA, 1989) will find instead a work far more precise in focus, methodical in approach, and cautious in the scale of the claims it is prepared to make, but also essential for the next generation of thinking on this subject. The book derives from a survey of all known published (and, where the author could learn of them, unpublished) inkwells *and things that might be inkwells* from the Roman world. 490 specimens are described in an online catalog (<https://dx.doi.org/10.5284/1039969>) of well over 100 pages, cited frequently in the chapters on typology. There is much to learn from all this about Roman writing practices. My chief complaint is how much of that learning is left as an exercise for the reader.

The book is tidily organized in three sections. The chapters of the first, taken singly or together, are admirable summaries of the state of the study of ancient literacy; on the practical logistics of ancient Roman writing on soft media; and on the social situation of Roman writing. The second section treats inkwells as objects, exploring their making, typologies, formal distinctions both aesthetic and functional, their functionality (in a chapter barely long or conclusive enough to earn the name), and their geographic distribution. The third section works through different social dimensions of Roman literacy—for example, the relationship between gender and literacy. Specialists will find that the first and third sections do little to move the needle on these topics, but that they are unparalleled in their mastery of the bibliography; upon reading them I swiftly added several items to the syllabus of an upcoming graduate seminar. In the middle section, non-archaeologist readers may struggle to keep up with the typologies; the third section, which attempts to cross-reference the known inkwells against the particular social categories that have interested historians of literacy, reaches few clear conclusions but offers a valuable number of illustrative tables.

Inkwells are often found and depicted alongside other writing tools, namely styli and wax tablets. Though Eckardt is careful to note when they are found together, there is little discussion of this confluence's significance. It would be easy to suppose these media are substantively different in affordances and uses both; the evidence assembled here suggests a far more complicated picture. For example, relative concentrations of inkwells and tablets 1) within an urban context and 2) between urban and rural contexts invite, if not conclusions, then at least some specific hypotheses about when and how these media did and did not overlap; but the approach taken is simply to present the evidence and to leave such analysis to the reader.

Notwithstanding numerous recent qualifications and complications, a “top-down” understanding of Roman literacy still prevails in the wider field, in which we use “literacy” as a shorthand term for Roman elites' own ideology of *paideia*. In addition to being an unprecedented resource on this important class of artifacts, Eckardt's book is further clear evidence of the value of considering not “literacy” but literate activities—who engaged in them, where, and how—in order to better understand the role of reading and writing throughout the Roman world. As the book's conclusion notes, there is still much work to do.

JOSEPH A. HOWLEY
Columbia University