
Raffaela Cribiore, who has previously examined the process of learning to write in Egypt (Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt, Atlanta, 1996), now offers a wider study of the system of education in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The strength of this work lies in the author’s papyrological expertise, which is supplemented by material from elsewhere in the Roman empire, particularly from the letters of Libanius dealing with his pupils and teaching practices.

The book is divided into two main sections. The first four chapters consider the physical conditions for education (‘Models of Schooling’), the teachers, the participation of women, and the purchasers and recipients of education (‘Parents and Students’). The next section begins with a discussion of the basic instruments of learning (teachers’ model material and books and the students’ writing materials, especially ostraca and papyri), then follows the traditional division by discussing the work of primary teachers of literacy, the grammarians, and the rhetors in three further chapters. Cribiore is well aware of the overlap among these chapters, but also notes how examining similar material from different angles can reveal new details. Only in the second section is a standard pattern of progression used and here it is stressed that the paradigm is often ignored in actual practice. Primary teachers (didaskaloi) might teach grammar and literature and grammatikoi might reinforce skills learned earlier (such as writing), while kathegetai (tutors) not only covered both these areas but could also enter the realm of the rhetores and the sophistai, who taught the theory and practice of public speaking.

Where Cribiore shines is in her sensitivity to the social environment (the teaching of an elite culture in Egypt) and in her detailed knowledge of the production of papyrological material. From this, a picture can be developed, for instance, of the rural chamaididaskalos, the educator without the status symbol of a chair, often teaching in the open (with the dogs and goats: 31), using basic materials to teach first the Greek alphabet, then the sounds of individual syllables, and only then a halting ability to read and write. Student exercises show the learning
(and, often, misunderstanding) of such skills. They also indicate that writing skills at a basic level accompanied progress in reading.

Whereas in medieval and Renaissance Europe, writing was mainly restricted to a scribal class, in Egypt the ubiquity of ostraca and the inexpensiveness of recycled or low grade papyri allowed many to gain a basic ability to pen a few phrases and sign their names. This is illustrated by the well-known example of Petaus, whose ability to write his name, title, and action ('I have passed this on': epidedōka) qualified him to become town registrar (kōmogrammateus). Cribiore shows that wax tablets, by contrast with ostraca and papyri, were more expensive and required regular renewal of the wax to remain useful (153). But they did allow swift composition without a need to dip a pen in ink and so continued in use through to the rhetorical schools.

In a brief review it is impossible to do justice to the richness of the material here and the possibilities for further research. Cribiore establishes beyond doubt that there were some female teachers at the lower levels. These are referred to in letters as deskalē (or deskalos), a general term which can also apply to the trainer of apprentices; nevertheless other references to learning basic literacy or the status of the pupils rules out apprentice training in most cases. Still levels of literacy were clearly lower for women: from papyrological finds men are fourteen times more likely to write letters (90 n.63), a figure which perhaps exaggerates the difference in ability, taking into consideration the evidence from age-rounding elsewhere in the Roman world which has been discussed by Duncan-Jones.

Whereas modern systems may blur the distinction between trade training and general education (cf. the New Zealand Qualifications Authority classifications), this does not appear to be the case in the ancient world. The social value of education, preparing the pupils in Egypt to advance in a system imposed by a foreign culture, is likely to be responsible for this. Cribiore also rightly indicates that the hierarchy of education does not act to establish a group of intellectuals, as in more modern ideals of the university, but to prepare a few who have rhetorical training for a limited number of legal and administrative posts. The costs of education and the small number of centres which possessed teachers of rhetoric assisted in the funneling process; the schools themselves would
then serve to establish close bonds among pupils which would be valuable in the world of patronage into which they were about to enter. The loss of papyri from centres such as Alexandria has undoubtedly robbed us of the opportunity to trace this process in detail, but the letters of Libanius show the pattern at work in Antioch.

That the mass of evidence comes from the villages in Egypt permits a vivid depiction of early education which is usefully compared with practices in modern Egypt and the Sahel (see figs. 10, 17). The role of violence in education is well illustrated, including a droll footnote (66 n.81): ‘Some forms of physical punishment still exist today in rural areas of the United States’. Criboire rightly highlights the universality of violence in the ancient world, correcting Wiedemann who saw the beating of children as a characteristic of peasant societies (69 n.96). Education not only provided competency (cf. the career of Apollonios, whose mediocre acquisition of skills at the secondary level qualified him for entry into the army and eventually to file reports on those using the asylum at the Serapeion to the local police chief: 189), but also inculcated the values of order and discipline, helping to maintain the established social system by its conservativeness. The importance of such control in Greco-Roman Egypt is obvious. Less clear and worthy of further exploration are the changes resulting from the rise of Christianity and monasticism and the arrival of the other great book of the East, the Koran.

In sum, this is a book which will be of great value not only for those interested in ancient education, but for all those concerned with the social history of the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

Arthur J. Pomeroy
Victoria University of Wellington