

Anna Missiou, *Literacy and Democracy in Fifth-Century Athens*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, XVI+211 pp., £ 50.00 (hb.) / 17.99 (pb.), ISBN 978-052-1111-409.

Anna MISSIOU (further M.), a professor in Crete, has made her name principally through her book on Andocides (*The Subversive Oratory of Andocides: Politics, Ideology and Decision-Making in Democratic Athens*, 1992). *Literacy and Democracy in Fifth-Century Athens* is the latest in a long series of books and articles on the issue of literacy in antiquity, hotly debated by scholars mostly undeterred by lack of direct evidence. Classical age Athens have always been on the forefront of the debate as the purveyor of quite ample, chronologically neatly packed evidence and as the cradle of democracy, since the issues of working of the democratic government and that of literacy of Athenian citizens have often been studied in conjunction. For over half a century two views have been expressed, challenged and reasserted in modern historiography: that the bulk of Athenian citizens could read and write and thus access plentiful documents often inscribed with formulae like ἵνα πάντες οἱ βουλόμενοι εἰδῶσιν (“so that all who desire may know”) or that the socio-economic conditions made Athens a society with “restricted literacy” in which no more than 5-10% people could read and write (HARRIS, HEDRICK, THOMAS). In recent years this last view seems to be winning the debate with much discussion focusing on comparative history which suggest that pre-industrial, mostly agricultural ancient society could not support enough schooling to result in anything approaching the universal literacy.

M. takes the opposite stance. She distances herself from the comparative methodology. She disbelieves its arguments precluding high literacy rates in the mostly rural society with no state-subsidized schooling, as, in her belief, children could learn how to read and write at home (pp. 130–133). In her view even less literate fellows would fast acquire proper writing skills while sitting on the Athenian council thanks to its non-elitist cooperative environment (pp. 135–137).

In her book M. undertakes to study literacy of citizens and not of all inhabitants of fifth c. BC Attica in reference to working of the Athenian polis. There is much to speak for her choice: this is the period of the triumph of democracy and the one which furnishes massive evidence, in particular some 11,000 *ostraka* written by politically active Athenian citizens. The underlying idea of M.’s book is that democracy with the popular participation of citizens in the decision making process fostered a very high literacy rate in fifth c. BC Athens. M. contends that the Cleisthenic reform which created artificial non-contiguous tribal units necessitated communication between demes’ leaders in various public matters. Since often demes belonging to one tribe were at a distance of as much as 40 or more kilometers, the traditional oral communication was, M. believes, not practical and therefore the Athenian polis had to move from the face-to-face society to the one based upon communication in writing (ch. I: “The geography of literacy”). However attractive this hypothesis might be, it is not only unsupported by any direct evidence but also it supposes an elaborate exchange of written communication between Athenian officials even in urgent matters of mobilizing troops.

In M.’s book ostracism is a case for a widespread literacy among Athenian citizens. She discusses at length (pp. 58–84, 15–159) the widely-held theory of specialized writers allegedly inscribing *ostraka* for illiterate Athenians, the support for which comes from a lot of 191 *ostraka* found on the North Slope of the Acropolis and inscribed mostly with the name of Themistocles. Oscar BRONEER’s (*Hesperia* VII 1938) identification of fourteen hands who inscribed almost all of them has been considered by many a decisive argument against the universal literacy in Athens. M. assails BRONEER’s arguments based on similarity on letterforms and attempts to show that differing spatial arrangements of letters speaks for much more individual writers than BRONEER suggested. Mistakes, variant readings, additional comments on some *ostraka* prove, in M.’s mind, that individual Athenians as a rule prepared their own *ostraka*.

M. gathers the direct evidence for the steady growth of the number of public documents in stone (ch. 4: "Literacy through intermediaries: II. Stone inscriptions") produced after Cleisthenes while pointing out to a much greater output in perishable media which could not survive. She successfully shows widespread use of written documents in various facets of public life. What follows is, in this chapter and in the next one (ch. 5: "Athenian literacy in its sociopolitical context"), that the widespread use of written records in Athens implies an almost universal literacy of people involved in running the state. In M.'s reconstruction the fabric of the Athenian polis required reading and writing skills from almost all involved. She thinks that all members of the *boule* had to be literate because among their duties was to supervise accounts and exchange written notices with other Athenian boards (pp. 118–120). This is the crucial point in M.'s discussion of the literacy in fifth c. Athens because she sides with the minority opinion that all classes of the Athenian society were eligible to sit on the *boule* (pp. 120–130) which, by the same token, represented a cross-section of Athenians. Various Athenian boards had secretaries quite obviously responsible for written documents. In ancient sources they are commonly called *demosioi*, that is by the word normally applied to slaves; hence, in universal opinion of the scholarship, these clerks were public slaves. M. rejects this interpretation (pp. 112–117), believing that slaves were (by definition) illiterate and therefore could not discharge clerical duties. This, in M.'s opinion, makes numerous Athenian clerks paid Athenian citizens, further enhancing the literacy rate in fifth c. Athens.

Much of M.'s consideration is compelling, e.g. she convincingly makes the case that there was hardly any financial barrier for spreading literacy in Athens, as the most common writing materials, *ostraka*, did not incur any expense at all and wooden tablets covered with wax or white-washed were not very expensive and reusable many times over. She succeeds as well in presenting the widespread use of writing within Athenian political system both in the central administration and within demes. But the principal aim of her book is to prove that Athens of the fifth c. BC enjoyed the state of mass literacy, i.e. that most of its citizens were functionally literate (pp. 109 f.). This hinges upon a number of assumptions, the most important being the right of the majority *thetes* to stand for office and for this there is no evidence. Without a clear evidence to support this claim, M.'s painstaking reconstruction of the working of the Athenian polis in the fifth c. BC should be perceived only as a model of an exceptional ancient society which might operate more smoothly with a high proportion of literate men among the politically active better-off minority of Athenians than without it. As to the paramount importance of the evidence of *ostraka* for the universal literacy in fifth c. Athens one can only quote what John K. DAVIES once said: "For example, the Athenian institution of ostracism assumed that at least 6,000 out of estimated adult male citizen population conventionally estimated at 30,000 could scratch a name legibly on a potsherd [...]. In other respects a literate assembly secretary could do most of what was needed" (in: *Ancient Archives and Archival Traditions. Concepts of Record-Keeping in the Ancient World*, ed. by M. BROSIUS, Oxford 2003, pp. 323 f., n. 3).

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