

Sarri (A.) *Material Aspects of Letter Writing in the Graeco-Roman World 500 BC – AD 300*. (Materiale Textkulturen 12.) Pp. viii + 388, figs, b/w & colour ill. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2018. Cased, £65.99, €79.95, US\$91.99. ISBN: 978-3-11-042694-6.

There has been a remarkable surge in recent publications on epistolary writing; but it remains the case that the material aspects, including layout and visual design, of ancient letters are still underexplored. This applies more largely to writing in all its forms, an issue that the interdisciplinary series ‘Material Text Cultures’, published in open access by De Gruyter (twenty volumes have appeared so far), aims to address. The book under review highlights the need to subject the materiality of epistolary communication to further study – without, however, fully doing the topic justice.

The book is organised in four chapters and three long appendices. The first chapter discusses, in 48 pages, the development of the letter-form, the formation of a specific terminology for letters, the distinction between literary and non-literary letters, and epistolary style, from the archaic period to Roman imperial times. This rather general account could have benefited from greater precision, as well as copy-editorial care: John Muir’s *Life and letters in the ancient world* (2009), which covers much of the same ground, is ignored; the discussion of postal service in Egypt on p. 12 refers to Remijsen 2007, which is missing in the bibliography (the reference is S. Remijsen, ‘The Postal Service...’, *Historia* 56 (2007), 127–140); the unattested γραμματειοφύλαξ (p. 13) is presumably an error for γραμματοφύλαξ; the discussion of epistolary formulas on p. 48, in particular the use of metaphorical kinship terms and the influence of Latin formulas on Greek ones, relies on various publications by E. Dickey, but does not do justice to Dickey’s complex and nuanced argument.

The second chapter focuses on the ‘evidence’ for letter-writing: that is, the chronological and geographical distribution of letters from the archaic to the Roman period, their preservation patterns, and the materials used (lead, papyrus, ostraca, wood, leather and parchment). Clay tablets should now be added: if the new text from Thasos published by N. Trippé, ‘Une lettre d’*époque classique à Thasos*’, *BCH* 139-140.1 (2015-2016), 43-65 is indeed a letter, it offers a welcome parallel to the unique document from Spain first published, on the basis of a photograph, by G. Dunst, ‘Ein griechisches Tontäfelchen von der Küste bei Ampurias’, *Madridrer Mitteilungen* 10 (1969) 146–54. S. offers useful charts of the chronological and geographical distribution of letters on papyri and ostraca, contrasting them with the overall distribution of all texts on papyri and ostraca, and highlighting peculiarities; she also makes the good point that the preservation of letters as part of archives has skewed the profile of the available data in more ways than one.

The third chapter treats the format and layout of letters: this part had the potential to be truly innovative, but the opportunity is missed. At least for the archaic and classical periods the analysis is simply not detailed enough. One misses comparison with the layout and format of other documents on lead (*defixiones* for instance), with the format of inscriptions, and with early abecedaria such as the one from Marsiliana D’Albegna, which offer the writer a ‘pre-organised’ surface. The degree of insight improves when we move to the Hellenistic period: S. discusses the formats available (*transversa charta*, Demotic style, and *pagina* format) and their socio-cultural contexts of use, as well as the layout of the main parts of a letter – but even here, consideration of writing practices on supports other than papyrus and ostraca might have helped in tracing developments. For instance, in discussing the practice of distinguishing the opening address from the rest of the body by *ekthesis* (p. 115-16), S. states that it is implemented for the first time on papyrus in an administrative letter by an official from Thebes, Paniskos, in c. 145 BCE and then spreads under Augustus. This is an

interesting development, and worth noting; but *ekthesis* of the first line had already been used for the royal letters in the ‘stone archive’ of Magnesia on the Maeander in c. 201 BCE.

The final chapter is dedicated to practices of authentication, with particular focus on changes of hands. Here too S. has important points to make: in particular, she argues that changes of hands in the farewell are much less frequent than is usually presupposed. The implication is that the majority of letters were written by their authors. The points made about archives, format and handshifts are supported by three appendices. The first (pp. 195–335) gives a list of all letters in archives, based on the list of archives in *Trismegistos* (<https://www.trismegistos.org/arch/index.php>); the second lists the dimensions of a selection of completely preserved letters (height, width, the proportion, and the direction of the fibres; width of margins is not considered); the third (pp. 347–66) is a list of all Hellenistic letters which feature an unequivocal handshift (only 15), followed by a selection of letters from the Roman period with identifiable handshift.

S. is clearly more at ease with papyrus documents, and with the late Hellenistic and Roman period: indeed, the main body of material used comes from the Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis der griechischen Papyrusurkunden Ägyptens, <https://aquila.zaw.uni-heidelberg.de/start>. S. presents the reader with a quantity of interesting data, which she supports with more than 70 images of papyri and numerous charts, so that the reader can follow her analysis with ease. Her efforts to contextualize her data within the history of ancient epistolary communication often remain somewhat superficial; nonetheless, her reminder that the material aspects of letter-writing convey information in and of themselves is an important and timely one.

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