

# LITERACY AND ORALITY IN ANCIENT GREECE

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## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction*

Impossible men: idle, illiterate,  
Self-pitying, dirty, sly,  
For whose appearance even in city parks  
Excuses must be made to casual passers-by.

Robert Graves

‘Make and send me copies of Books 6 and 7 of Hypsicrates’ *Komodoumenoi* (*Men Made Fun of in Comedy*). For Harpocration says that they are among Polion’s books. But it is likely that others, too, have got them. He also has his prose epitomes of Thersagoras’ works *On the Myths of Tragedy* . . .’

Note added in another hand: ‘According to Harpocration, Demetrius the bookseller has got them. I have instructed Apollonides to send me certain of my own books which you will hear of in good time from Seleucus himself. Should you find any, apart from those which I possess, make copies and send them to me. Diodorus and his friends also have some which I haven’t got.’

Letter found at Oxyrhynchus, second century AD<sup>1</sup>

‘Oh, he’s illiterate’, someone may say, and they mean, not that the object of their scorn is unable to read and write, but that he is uncivilized – or simply boorish (as above), or that he has not read the great works of literature, that he is not educated to a high standard. In other words, we use the descriptions ‘literate’ and ‘illiterate’ today to denote a whole range of meanings, for both the ability to read and write, and the degree of refinement or culture. The confusion is a significant one, which may tell us more about our own culture than others. What about societies other than our own, where books are hard to come by, or where artistic achievements were largely transmitted orally, entirely without writing, or

<sup>1</sup> Quoted, Turner 1968: 87.

where poetry was performed and sung rather than read silently in written texts? What about ancient Greece? The close and comforting identity of literacy with civilization that is so strong in twentieth-century culture begins to seem peripheral and at worst irrelevant to the understanding of a society like that of classical Greece – and to some extent the whole of the ancient world. For the lines between culture and lack of culture, education and backwardness, were drawn differently; the relation of written and oral communication, and of both these to higher education, took on rather different forms. The second passage above is interesting partly because it is an exchange between learned men in the more rarefied and scholarly atmosphere of Graeco-Roman Egypt under the Roman Empire. Even here, it is clear that the very acquisition of books is complicated and involves delicate search amongst book-sellers, private individuals, friends. Most important, when you have tracked something down, you should secure it by making your own private copy.

It is exceedingly hard for us to think objectively about literacy or its opposite, oral communication by word of mouth only, 'orality'. In modern, western society, illiteracy is indeed a severe handicap. The modern world is inconceivable without the written word, the illiterate is excluded. Illiteracy, in a culture so dependent on the accumulated wisdom of books, is tantamount to backwardness and barbarism. For most people who read with complete ease, the application and uses of writing seem obvious and inevitable (so inevitable that it is difficult to imagine a world where they are not central). It is taken for granted that we should all be alarmed at recent surveys in Britain which reveal many people unable to fill in a simple form, or in America, where there is talk of a 'literacy crisis'. We probably *should* be concerned, but so much is assumed about the centrality of 'literacy' itself, that there is surprisingly little discussion of why such low literacy rates should be disturbing, and even less of what 'literacy', which is a very complex phenomenon, really means. Are we talking here about a specific modern brand of western literacy, for instance, or about literacy in general? The value of literacy in modern society is more likely to be defended by contrasting it vaguely with illiteracy, but this evades the most interesting issues. Our current modern identification of literacy with civilization as such was crystallized during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

The ancient world makes many of these ideas seem simplistic and naive. Three centuries after the arrival of alphabetic writing in Greece, classical Greeks (fifth to fourth centuries BC) were able to leave a substantial body of literature in writing, and the city-states used documents, inscriptions, even archives, in varying degrees, for government. So at first glance, ancient Greece seems self-evidently a society which relied extensively on the written word, which included a very large number of literates among its population, and which, in short, could be considered 'a literate society'. After all, it is these literary achievements of Greek civilization which Western society has inherited. Yet ancient Greece was in many ways an oral society in which the written word took second place to the spoken. Far more was heard or spoken, rather than written and read, than we can easily envisage.

That the spoken word continued to have value is a platitude for any society – even the modern obsession with paper-work leaves some room for it, after all. But it is a question of balance. The extent of oral communication needs particular emphasis for classical students who are so familiar with the ancient world through reading written texts that an effort of imagination is required to appreciate the sheer extent to which written texts were simply not created or used. Certainly there was an extraordinarily sophisticated range of literary and intellectual activity in the classical centuries. Yet most Greek literature was meant to be heard or even sung – thus transmitted orally – and there was a strong current of distaste for the written word even among the highly literate: written documents were not considered adequate proof by themselves in legal contexts till the second half of the fourth century BC. Politics was conducted orally. The citizens of democratic Athens listened in person to the debates in the Assembly and voted on them there and then. Very little was written down and the nearest Greek word for 'politician' was 'orator' (*rhetor*). Tragedy was watched in the theatre, and rhetoric or the art of speaking was a major part of Greek education. A civilized man in Greece (and indeed Rome) had to be able, above all, to speak well in public. Socrates pursued his philosophical enquiries in conversation and debate and wrote nothing down. His pupil Plato attacked the written word as an inadequate means of true education and philosophy: he may have published his own work in dialogue form in order to recreate the atmosphere of oral discourse and debate, and towards the end of his

life he may have decided against committing any of his most important views to written form at all (*Seventh Letter*, attributed to Plato).

Even where a written text existed, it was read aloud. The historian Herodotus was said to have given public readings.<sup>2</sup> In the second century AD the Sophist and philosopher Lucian could take it for granted, even in that learned age, that of course Herodotus had recited his *Histories* to the huge audiences at Olympia – rather than separately in different places – simply because that was the most rapid and economical way of propagating his work (Lucian, *Herodotus or Aëtion* 1–2). Public oral transmission was still commonplace in the second century AD and its prevalence in earlier times taken as obvious. In other words, whether or not a written text existed, oral transmission, performance, and discourse were predominant. The divisions were drawn along very different lines from ours.

Scholars have indeed tended to see Greece as a literate or an oral society according to their predominant interests and tastes. And Greece lies at the centre of the general debate about the value of literacy. Havelock, for instance, a famous cultural historian, stressed that it was largely an oral society until Plato's time; scholars more concerned with the study of literature itself tend to see it as literate. But a lot depends on where you look, and it is not in any case clear what these terms really mean. The tendency to see a society (or individual) as either literate or oral is over-simple and misleading. The habits of relying on oral communication (or orality) and literacy are not mutually exclusive (even though literacy and illiteracy are). As we have seen, the evidence for Greece shows *both* a sophisticated and extensive use of writing in some spheres *and* what is to us an amazing dominance of the spoken word. Fifth-century Athens was not a 'literate society', but nor was it quite an 'oral society' either. Clearly oral communication and writing are far from incompatible here (nor are they now, of course, in the modern world, though people often speak as if they were). We can see that the presence of writing does not necessarily destroy all oral elements of a society, and orality does not preclude complex intellectual activity. Not only did philosophers discuss extremely difficult problems without using writing to help, but dense and complex literature was regularly heard rather than read by its public. The written word was more often used in the service of the spoken.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Momigliano 1978: esp. 64–6 for Hdt.; see also Flory 1980.

<sup>3</sup> As Andersen 1987; R. Thomas 1989.

From the start, then, literacy and orality must be examined together in ancient Greece, as indeed in the whole of the ancient world. Rather than separating the literate areas in one period from the oral, or still worse, the earlier centuries, supposedly oral, from the later, supposedly 'literate' ones, we should examine the interaction of oral and written communication techniques. This approach can be very profitable in anthropological studies, for it is now extremely hard to find societies totally unaffected by the written word in any way.<sup>4</sup> As the example of Socrates makes so clear, the totality of Greek life cannot be understood unless the oral side of Greek society is appreciated as well as the written and, if possible, the relation between the two. The study of literacy and orality thus embraces the whole of ancient civilization.

Another fundamental point is that the degree, extent, and significance of literacy will change over the centuries (as will orality), and from society to society, even within the multifarious communities of Greece. This perhaps sounds obvious but there is a strong tendency among scholars to treat literacy, particularly ancient literacy, as if it were a constant. This is partly encouraged by the nature of the evidence which is anecdotal and partial: indications crop up here and there that someone was literate, or that writing was necessary in a certain sphere, but we do not have the evidence for a coherent picture, let alone a statistical one, even for the heavily documented fourth century BC. So it is tempting to take evidence from later or earlier centuries as if it were equally relevant. Our instinctive perceptions of literacy also reinforce this static image: it is easily assumed that once writing became known in Greece in the eighth century BC, it rapidly gained all the obvious functions it had later. Modern interest in Greek literacy has tended to focus on the developments of the period of alphabetic origins and on the general question of the extent of literacy. This is now changing somewhat, but the implications of change for the meaning of literacy itself are still not fully appreciated.

If the use of the written word changes considerably over the period, so does its relation to the spoken word. This fluidity must be accommodated by any wider theories of the implications of literacy or orality and we shall return to these in more depth in chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> Finnegan 1988: ch. 8 for theoretical points, the rest for their application; also 1977.

First, however, we should define the terms 'orality' or 'oral' and 'literacy' more precisely. It should be emphasized that each has a straightforward descriptive use – either something is written or spoken (oral) or it is not. But these terms also tend to be used with what I would call a prescriptive meaning, where 'oral' or 'literate' or 'written' are meant to imply a certain mentality or a range of characteristics in addition to the simple descriptive meaning. This may serve as a preliminary to the wider controversies discussed in the next chapter.

'Orality' is especially prone to vagueness. 'Oral' essentially means 'by word of mouth', without writing. Thus 'orality' should strictly mean the habit of relying entirely on oral communication rather than written. It was coined deliberately on the analogy of 'literacy' in order to denote this quality in a positive sense: avoiding the implications of failure in 'illiteracy'. Oral communication means communication by word of mouth alone. When ancient historians used living witnesses as sources for events they had lived through, they were employing oral communication and oral tradition. When ancient literature was read aloud or recited to listeners, it was, in a sense, being communicated and spread around orally (the written texts could also spread it through writing). An 'oral poet', like Homer, composes in his head without writing, as well as singing his poetry aloud to an audience.

But as is clear even in this brief summary there are various degrees of 'orality' and they are not always separated or even discerned. For instance an influential school of thought believes that poetry can only be classified as 'oral poetry' if it is actually improvised on the spur of the moment (see chapter 3). This involves going beyond the basic meaning of 'oral' to a complex classification which would exclude much poetry that was indeed composed and propagated completely without writing. Moreover, oral communication in one sphere does not necessarily entail oral communication in another. We should therefore be careful to distinguish (at least) three components of orality: oral communication, oral composition, and oral transmission, as the anthropologist Ruth Finnegan has stressed.<sup>5</sup> Each of these components has a different relation to writing.

Moreover orality is often idealized, invested with the romantic

<sup>5</sup> Finnegan 1977: 16–24; also Gentili 1988: 4–5.

and nostalgic ideas connected with folklore, folk culture, and folk tradition, or the 'noble savage'. 'Oral culture' is often used interchangeably with folklore, folklore is seen as 'oral tradition', and with little critical examination, but much idealism, orality and 'oral societies' take on the romantic and exaggerated attributes of folk culture. In other words they become more than merely descriptive tools and start to imply a whole mentality or world view which is partly born of a reaction to the modern world. Oral culture is innocent, pure, and natural, uncorrupted by the written word, or perhaps, depending on one's standpoint, the pure manifestation of a people's character. In the study of Greece, this romanticism is most clearly visible in modern discussions of Homer and oral poetry.

Part of the problem here seems to lie in the fact that for cultures with no writing at all, there is little evidence for the past other than memories and oral tradition – and these themselves become altered by time. This by itself will produce a highly distorted picture in which variations and changes in the past have been levelled out. It has sometimes been thought, for instance, that primitive cultures (which would lack writing) do not change. But this image of oral culture as totally static, often undermined by archaeological excavations, has surely been fostered by the fact that no written evidence has survived from the past to contrast with the present. The slow, subtle changes in customs and habits are the last things such societies would try to remember in their oral traditions. A shallow, unchanging past can be the effect of the oral tradition, not a fundamental characteristic of oral societies.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, some studies of orality emphasize that oral societies are 'warm' personal societies, since all communication of any kind has to be done face-to-face, and the alienating individualism of the reader is absent.<sup>7</sup> Yet the remote and old-fashioned village communities in modern Greece, for instance, where every family is pitted against the rest, hardly conform to this ideal.<sup>8</sup> Nor, of course, are all societies without writing the same: this is self-evident as soon as we think, for instance, of Greece in the ninth century BC before the alphabet arrived, and the Somali in the early twentieth century before literacy had much influence. Yet most work on

<sup>6</sup> Vansina 1985.

<sup>7</sup> Ong 1982, and 1986.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. du Boulay 1974; Campbell 1964; now Winkler 1990 for ancient Greece.

orality has been looking for the crucial common features of such societies: deliberately or not, it is all too easy to give the impression that they are identical. Studies which stress the general characteristics of orality, and which believe that the method of communication is decisive in determining a society's character, inevitably tend to see oral culture as homogeneous rather than varied.

There are even more pitfalls in defining literacy, but literacy – or its products – can at least be more easily isolated and imagined. It is important to draw out the possibilities because they must lie behind any plausible attempt to study literacy. Some of the modifications suggested in our approach to literacy should have important implications for the concept of orality.

Firstly, there are obviously many different levels of literacy. No single definition is adequate and any attempt to take a single one will over-simplify and distort. We might define literacy as the ability to read and write, but read and write *what?* Different levels are involved today, for example, in reading simple signs and notices, a popular newspaper, or a lengthy book; many people can manage the first two but not the last. A definition of literacy as the simple ability to read short passages of written texts or to fill in a simple form (common tests of literacy) tells us nothing about the impact of books. In the Greek context, reading a passage scratched on a potsherd and reading a poetic papyrus are quite different activities. In the fifth century BC there were hardly any books, and the tragedian Euripides was thought most eccentric for owning a 'library' of several books (papyrus rolls). So even in classical Athens at the height of its power hardly any of its citizens would have had the opportunity, let alone the need, to read a book, and we should assume they would have found it hard. Persevering through a whole papyrus roll, which might be as much as twenty-two feet long, had no word-divisions, and required a special posture,<sup>9</sup> needed a vastly different skill from the keeping of simple accounts which we hear of in comedy, or reading the list of public debtors, or even the proposals for new laws posted up in the agora. Well-documented examples can be multiplied from more recent periods of history where 'literacy' is a totally inadequate term to cover the many degrees of reading ability and reading contexts: in early modern England, for instance, there were a large number of differ-

<sup>9</sup> Reynolds and Wilson 1991: 2; Parassoglou 1979.

ent scripts in use, and it was quite common for someone to be able to read printed texts, but not handwriting.<sup>10</sup> There has been little attempt to pursue the possibility of clearly defined types of reading skills in the ancient world, but it is surely very likely. When a prosperous freedman, Hermeros, in Petronius' *Satyricon* says he knows only 'lapidary writing' (*lapidariae litterae*, *Sat.* 58.7.), by which he must mean the capitals of inscriptions,<sup>11</sup> we gain a rare glimpse of differentiated reading skills in the ancient world which may have been quite regular.

The tendency to treat literacy as if it were a monolithic skill may be a modern fallacy. It is characteristic of twentieth-century definitions of literacy to lay weight on the ability to read a totally unfamiliar text, even a nonsense text. But this is a recent development, and one which tends to regard literacy merely as a technique or skill that can be measured in isolation from the kind of texts likely to be read. In the Middle Ages, tests of literacy gave the individual a text he would be familiar with, the Bible, and a great deal of reading would be devoted not to new texts but to the familiar Biblical ones. This brings us back to the importance of *what* is being read. The ancient reader was not constantly inundated with totally new texts (novels, newspapers): much available reading matter would be partially familiar or even memorized (e.g. Homer), or else reinforced by having been read aloud first (e.g. proposals of decrees). It may well be more appropriate to think in terms of 'phonetic literacy' and 'comprehension literacy', concepts used by P. Saenger to denote two common degrees of reading ability in the later Middle Ages. 'Comprehension literacy' was 'the ability to decode a text silently, word by word' and understand it fully; 'phonetic literacy' was the ability to 'decode texts syllable by syllable and to pronounce them orally', close to oral rote memorization.<sup>12</sup> 'Phonetic literacy' seems particularly relevant to the ancient context where reading was not done silently, and where literary texts would often be read in order to be memorized (see chapter 5).

The degree of skill will also partly reflect the need for writing in daily life. Much evidence suggests that the ability to read and write is forgotten if there is no use for it (this has happened in some

<sup>10</sup> K. Thomas 1986: 100: see 99–103 for a devastating critique of monolithic definitions of literacy.

<sup>11</sup> W. V. Harris 1989: 252 takes them to be simply capitals; see also Daniel 1980: 158–9.

<sup>12</sup> Saenger 1989: esp. 142.

modern literacy campaigns). From fairly early on, Athenian potters wrote in the names of the figures they painted, and the incentives to write may have made them some of the more literate in archaic Athens.<sup>13</sup> Women had no part in public life, and were probably almost all illiterate unless they kept domestic accounts, but their male counterparts in Athens were surrounded by the written records of democratic business. The subsistence farmers in remote parts of Greece could probably manage without writing entirely. News was spread by word of mouth (even after the invention of printing, newspapers were not a regular part of life till the eighteenth century in England<sup>14</sup>). Most legal transactions actually required witnesses and oaths in preference to written documents which were distrusted as valid proof.<sup>15</sup>

A further dimension is easily missed and should be reinserted into the debate: reading and writing are quite distinct processes which are not necessarily mastered by the same individual. Throughout history many more people have been able to read than write. In the Middle Ages it was mainly scribes and monks who wrote; in sixteenth-century England many quite educated people could only read, not write, and it was common to go to a specialist writer, a scrivener or secretary, if you needed something written.<sup>16</sup> Sweden's extraordinarily high rate of 'literacy' achieved by the eighteenth century was actually in reading alone, for the main aim had been to read the Bible (incidentally, it was achieved without school provision, though it is generally assumed today that only formal schooling can procure high literacy rates).<sup>17</sup> In ancient Greece, then, we should probably assume that many more people could read to some degree than could write – at least in cities like Athens, where there existed material and incentives to read. But the evidence is always skewed towards those who could write, for only they leave clear evidence of their skills.

I should say something here about calculating the extent of literacy from the evidence of ability to sign one's name. This method has been widespread in historical surveys.<sup>18</sup> It raises more

<sup>13</sup> Street 1984; Stoddart and Whitley 1988.

<sup>14</sup> K. Thomas 1986; 113.

<sup>15</sup> Todd 1990; Humphreys 1985; Pringsheim 1955.

<sup>16</sup> K. Thomas 1986.

<sup>17</sup> Swedish literacy: Graff 1986, and 1987; cf. Harris' stress on schooling, 1989.

<sup>18</sup> Cressy 1980; Schofield 1968; Houston 1985, and 1988; contrast K. Thomas 1986.

interesting questions than immediately meet the eye, anticipating some of the themes of chapter 2. The method is useful because so many surviving documents needed a person's mark or signature. But how much does this really indicate about literacy (let alone anything more complex)? In any period where more people can read than write, leaving your 'mark' may yet allow reading skills and therefore participation in written culture. Alternatively, signing your name could be the only grain of literacy acquired. Clearly this is likely if signing your name brings advantages or privileges (compare the incentive to learn Latin in the Middle Ages to obtain clerics' privileges). In Graeco-Roman Egypt the proof that someone was literate was his ability to sign his name. We actually know of one 'scribe' (whose profession brought privileges) who was clearly illiterate except for this one skill: the papyrus on which he had to keep practising his signature has been found, and he could not even copy his own signature correctly for very long.<sup>19</sup> In classical Greece on the other hand, the signature was unknown and seals and witnesses were used for proof and authentication. What emerges here is that the ability to sign one's name is not a neutral measurement of literacy (though it may in fact correlate with wider literacy in modern England). It can only be a function of the social or cultural context.

It is therefore highly misleading to produce some statistical calculation of 'literacy rates' for ancient Greece, based inevitably upon some single definition of literacy. Various studies have produced some kind of estimate, but the likelihood of vastly differing degrees of literate skills has been ignored except perhaps by the most sensitive.<sup>20</sup> Given the complexity of literacy and the paucity of detailed ancient evidence, all we can say with any plausibility is that probably more people could read than write; the ability to read or write very simple messages, often in capitals, was probably not rare; and in cities like Athens where there was a profusion of democratic documents, most citizens had some basic ability and perhaps 'phonetic literacy' was pretty widespread; but that the written texts of poetry and literary prose had a reading audience confined to the highly educated and wealthy elite, and their secretaries.

<sup>19</sup> See Youtie 1971b; see ch. 7, pp. 151–5 for Egyptian context.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Turner 1952; Kenyon 1951; Greene 1951; Harvey 1966; Woodbury 1976; Burns 1981; Cartledge 1978; most comprehensive is W. V. Harris 1989.

This all sounds pitifully vague. But the complexity of 'literacy' is fundamental. What we should be turning our attention to is not calculating literacy rates, but examining what literacy is used for: the calculation of literacy rates assumes we understand the significance of such rates. This may be true for the modern world, but is manifestly not for the ancient (or intervening periods). Close examination reveals a bewildering range of ways of using the written word, which seem very largely to reflect the society in question and its beliefs. Wider theories about the significance or implications of literacy (in general) must also be modified by such variation.

In the next chapter we turn to this wider debate about the significance of writing. Before doing so, however, it will help to survey the main lines of development in the use of writing and the place of orality. Such chronological change in the use and significance of literacy (and so of orality) underlies the structure of this book.

Mycenaean culture (c. 1500–1100 BC) had a syllabic script we call Linear B, which seems to have been used only for palace records. It apparently died out with the palace culture that had supported it. The alphabet was adapted from the Phoenician alphabet probably in the first half of the eighth century, but its use spread only gradually. It was apparently not used for public functions till the middle of the seventh century – to judge from the surviving stone inscriptions – but the flood of documents on stone mainly dates from the 460s in Athens, the time of the radical democracy. The Greek city-states seem to have used writing very sparingly till the fifth and fourth centuries.

The earliest Greek literature we possess, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, seem, however, to belong to a society which had little or no use of writing. Usually dated to the eighth century, they seem to be the product of entirely oral composition as well as oral performance. This thesis, proposed by Milman Parry in the 1930s, has had enormous influence: it drew the attention of classicists to the extent of oral communication in Greece, raised the alarming possibility that fine literature might not always issue from a highly literate culture, and focused attention on oral poetry all over the world. Though there is still disagreement about how Homer's poetry eventually got written down, it clearly does belong to an early period at which writing was barely known, if at all, and had not affected a primarily oral culture.

In the archaic period (c. 700–500 BC), writing was used for private inscriptions, the first written laws and many religious purposes. The poets of this period are assumed to have made their own written copies of their poems, though these were performed and heard, not read. Presumably most of life was conducted without the written word. Classical politicians cultivated the arts of oratory, but without written texts. The Athenian general and politician Pericles was said to be the first man to have a written text with him when he spoke (440s–430s).<sup>21</sup> But he left no published speeches, and the controversy about written speeches carried on into the fourth century (see Alcidamas, *On Those Who Compose Written Speeches*). Published written literature was becoming fairly common from the beginning of the fifth century, but books were very rare until about the end of the century. Jokes about *biblia*, ‘books’ or rather papyrus rolls, appear in Athenian comedy in the last three or four decades. There is even some evidence now of a book-quarter, or at least ‘book shops’.<sup>22</sup> Our earliest evidence for the book trade is Xenophon’s reference to a shipwreck with a cargo of *biblia* (*Anabasis* 7.5.14). By the middle of the fourth century they were much more common, though they still cannot have been numerous.<sup>23</sup> The first reference to a solitary reader of literature as opposed to communal reading is in the *Frogs* (405 BC), where the god Dionysus says he has been reading Euripides’ *Andromeda* to himself (Aristophanes, *Frogs* 52). But solitary and silent reading was almost unknown. In both Greece and Rome written texts, particularly literary ones, were usually read aloud.<sup>24</sup>

Even where public documents were made, they were not yet kept with any sophistication or even necessarily used again (see chapter 5 below). Athens itself had a central archive only from the end of the fifth century and had to revise the laws at the same time, probably because their proliferation on inscriptions and in archives

<sup>21</sup> Turner 1952: 18 (from the Suda Lexicon). For imagery involving writing, Aeschylus, *Suppliants* 944–51; Pindar, *Olympian* 10.1 ff; and Pfeiffer 1968: 25–6, Easterling *JHS* 105 (1985): 4, for further refs. which show that writing is familiar in the fifth century.

<sup>22</sup> See Davison 1962: 108 for ‘book-sellers’ (*bibliopolai*); Turner 1952: 20–2. But note that Aristophanes, *Birds* 1288ff, evidence for the ‘book-sellers’ quarter’, is hopelessly full of punning (*biblia* puns on books/rinds of papyrus) and *biblia* does not only denote ‘books’.

<sup>23</sup> See Turner 1952; Easterling 1985; Flory 1980; Kenyon 1951.

<sup>24</sup> See Knox 1968, arguing, however, that silent reading was not so rare as to be astonishing: he cites esp Euripides, *Hippolytus* 856ff, Aristophanes, *Knights* 115–28 (add [Aristotle], *Problems* 18.1 and 7 on reading in bed?); see Immerwahr 1964 for books on vases; Svenbro 1987, and 1988a more generally; Knox 1985; cf. Saenger 1989 for later Middle Ages.

left it quite unclear what was legal. But in the fourth century a new spirit of professionalism creeps in and the written word seems to be accorded greater respect. Plato's strictures against writing as a medium of education are to be understood against a proliferation of books and written manuals. The written document becomes more common in other spheres, and is now being used for the first time by Greek historians as evidence in a manner we would recognize as adequate. Athens by the end of the fourth century has become what I have called 'document-minded' (borrowing a phrase from the medievalist Michael Clanchy). This looks forward to the methods of the Hellenistic period and Rome. Yet still, it should be remembered, literature went on being read aloud. Rhetoric was important in Roman higher education as well as Greek. And even the most learned and antiquarian writers of the Greek world under the Roman Empire exerted enormous effort and energy in giving declamations, or displays of rhetorical and verbal skill, to packed audiences.

Greek civilization has lain at the centre of the controversies which have raged – and still rage – over the general or universal meaning of literacy and the nature of oral society. The subject has suffered from a great deal of such schematization. This book will argue that a rather different and richer approach to ancient orality and literacy is called for. Neither literacy nor orality are constants, and their roles can be extraordinarily diverse, often reflecting much more of the society using writing or oral communication than any expectations of general characteristics. Moreover, the patterns of literacy and orality in the ancient world have in part governed what has been written down and therefore preserved for us today. This means that far more is involved than a calculation of the number of literates. The study of ancient literacy and orality may encompass a large part of Greek culture or else reflect upon it.