

(Il)literacy in early Christian monasticism: Ambiguous anchoring

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The Christian tradition inherited the centrality of sacred scripture from Judaism and likewise developed into a 'religion of the book' (Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, Cambridge University Press 1997). Concerning the materiality of Scripture, it has been noted that early Christians favoured the innovative format of the codex over the scroll and Harry Gamble has researched both textual production and the availability of books in early Christianity. He has also emphasized the vital importance of the library (in cities, churches, and monasteries) as a place where people could access texts (*Books and Readers in the Early Church*, Yale University Press 1995). As the early Christian monastic tradition developed, monasteries became centres of education because reading and writing skills were a requirement for membership. Thus, monastic institutions became hubs of literacy and recent scholarship has explored this literacy movement, including its material dimension in the form of writing exercises found on *ostraka* (*Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia*, edited by Lilian Larsen and Samuel Rubenson, Cambridge University Press 2018).

In my paper, I will discuss various aspects of the both formative and ambiguous role played by literacy in the anchoring of the monastic enterprise. On the one hand, this was a practical matter: the skills of reading and writing were considered essential to the life of the monk because these enabled him to study the Scriptures. On the other hand, monastics were deeply ambiguous about the learning of letters (*grammata*), an attitude evidenced by the portrayal of Saint Antony, whose *illiteracy* is praised in his *vita* (written by bishop Athanasius circa 357 CE) as a sign of his being *theodidaktos*, taught solely by God. Athanasius' praise of Antony's illiteracy is clearly ideological since we know that Antony wrote letters and thus was a literate man (Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: The Making of a Saint*, Lund University 1990; Fortress Press 1995). In the *Apophthegmata Patrum* we also find the disparagement of learning vis-à-vis the wisdom of the 'rustic'; paradoxically, the alphabet *an sich* becomes the symbol of spiritual knowledge that is valued above secular schooling. In the presentation, I will first elaborate and comment on recent developments in the scholarly field of literacy acquisition in ancient monasticism. Next, I will analyze a number of early Christian source texts relating to the theme of (il)literacy and its practical as well as ideological implications. Finally, I venture to reflect on a kind of reciprocal anchoring that seems to be in play here: while monasticism is anchored practically by literacy but ideologically by the notion of illiteracy, literacy itself is also anchored via monastic practice and belief as a vital skill in a predominantly illiterate society.