Writing and Writers in Antiquity: Two "Spectra" in Greek Handwriting

Alan Mugridge

This study concerns two so-called "spectra" in Greek handwriting from the fourth century BC to the fourth century AD. The first is the "spectrum" between two kinds of writing – "book hand" (for literary texts) and "documentary hand" (for non-literary texts). The second is the "spectrum" between two kinds of writers – "professional scribes" and "non-professional writers." Is it valid to speak of a "spectrum" in these two cases? Further, what was the relationship between these – the writing style employed for a MS and the writer being a "professional scribe" or simply someone who was capable of writing, especially when copying literary works? The study is based on an examination of photographs and descriptions of MSS in standard handbooks of Greek palaeography, the recent work by Johnson on literary rolls from Oxyrhynchus, as well as the MSS on the APIS database which fall within the timeframe and have significant terms in their palaeographic notes indicating writing style and level of professionalism.

"Book Hand" and "Documentary Hand"

In relation to the so-called "spectrum" between "book hand" and "documentary hand" the following observations may be made. First, it is well known that the terms used to group the textual content of MSS are not exact. "Documents" can include a range of items such as address labels, amulets and tax returns. "Literary and sub-literary" texts can include epic, letters and prayers. So, letters may be classed as literary or sub-literary, but business letters as documentary; magical papyri are often classed as non-documentary, but amulets as documentary. Further, in antiquity what was thought of as "literary" changed over time, as new works were written and accepted as "literature." Clearly, however useful these two categories may be in general – and we will use them in this paper – they are not precise.

Second, the definitions of writing styles are somewhat circular. "Book hand" is often defined as the handwriting in which "books" were written, which seems to be rather circular. Indeed, many documents are said to be written in "book hand" and literary works in "documentary hand." Plainly, the definitions of "book hand" and "documentary hand" are somewhat circular, and Turner was right to stress that book hand was only "normally ... used for the writing of books."
However, despite the fact that the descriptions of texts are not precise and the definitions of writing styles are somewhat circular, it was "normal" much of the time for the handwriting style used for "literature" to be of a different character from that employed for contemporary "documents," however small and ill defined that difference may have been at times. A letter (P.Fl.or. II 259, AD 249–268) shows that different scripts were (at least sometimes) seen as appropriate for different kinds of texts, since the body of the letter is written in "a relatively fast cursive," but a quotation from Homer in the margin is in "well-separated, upright, and bilinear letters."7 Certainly, the writing of the Hawara Homer shows a care to produce a roll or codex with a literary appearance in contrast to contemporary "documents."

Third, the character of these two broad styles of writing varied considerably during the period under discussion. It seems that Greek handwriting, both for literature and documents, was originally in "epigraphic" form, resembling the lettering on a number of inscriptions. The few documents from the fourth century BC, such as P.Eleph. I (marriage contract), are all said to be written in "an epigraphic hand" or "inscription style."8 The few literary papyri from the same century, such as P.Derveni (comment on an Orphic theogony), are all described as being written in "inscription," "epigraphic," or "lapidary" style.9 Thus, from the scanty evidence available, some from outside Egypt, it seems that in the fourth century BC both documents and literature were generally written in the style of certain inscriptions.10

However, from the third century BC onward Greek handwriting in Egypt developed in two different directions. "Book hand" preserved more of the inscription style — with separate letters and in "strictly" or "roughly" bilinear writing. In Ptolemaic times a bilinear hand was used (e.g. P.Oxy. XV 1790; Ibycus, II BC). In Roman times (I–IV AD) book hand occurred in an informal round form (e.g. P.Oxy. XVII 2078; Euripides or Critias, Pirithous, II AD) as well as in formal round type (e.g. P.Oxy. XVII 2075; Hesiod, Catalogue, III AD). Other kinds of formal round hand are biblical majuscule (e.g. P.Oxy. XXII 2334; Aeschylus, Septem, III/IV AD) and Coptic uncial (e.g. BL pap. 825; receipt, AD 155 with early characteristics of this type), and there are "formal mixed" hands (e.g. P.Oxy. XXXIV 2699; Apollonios Rhodius, Argonautica 3, III AD). We should also mention Schubart’s "severe style," evident, for example, in Codex Washingtonensis of the Gospels (IV–early V AD).

In contrast, documents of various kinds were mostly written in a faster, "cursive" mode of writing, here too with developments over the centuries as well as variations among scribes at any one time.11 In the third century BC there was a bilinear documentary style (e.g. P.Cair.Zen. I 59132; letter, 256 BC) and a unilinear documentary style (e.g. P.Cair.Zen. I 59106; letter, 257 BC), and there are papyri with a

---

8. Cf. P.Saqqara inv.1972 GP 3.c (army order); P.Saqqara inv.71/2 GP 9 (no. 5676) (accounts).
11. Turner, op.cit. (above, n. 4) 2 interprets Plato, Laws 810b as referring to "rapid" hands already in use in the fourth century BC, but the evidence is minimal.
mixture of both (e.g. *P.Hamb.* II 176; letter, 241 BC). A "chancery hand" developed in the government offices in Alexandria (e.g. *P.Cair.Zen.* II 59155; letter, 256 BC). The inner copy of double contracts was sometimes written in Seider's "Zickzackschrift" (e.g. *P.Amh.* II 42; loan repayment, 179 BC), and another form of documentary hand is his "Kettenschrift" (e.g. *P.Yale* I 36; letter, 190 BC). Certain hands seemed appropriate for certain kinds of documents, such as for hypomnemata (e.g. *P.Oxy.* XXXI 2535; late 1 AD).

Thus, from one "inscription style" various kinds of book hands developed over the centuries, which retained bilinearity and a link with the older inscription style. A variety of documentary hands, both bilinear and unilinear, also developed, moving further away from the original inscription style, although not entirely different from bilinear book hands until the fourth century AD.12

Therefore, is it appropriate to speak of a "spectrum" between book hand and documentary hand? The problem with the word "spectrum" is that it implies a straight line between two extremes, along which all other papyri may be placed. Clearly, the matter is more complex than that because of a number of factors – the varieties within each of these two writing styles, the difference between the two not being always distinctly marked, and the fact that handwriting changed over time. Perhaps it would be better to speak of two broad "fields" (book hand and documentary hand), in which a number of genres (e.g. epic, letters, amulets) were often written; but they were not mutually exclusive, they were only ever approximate and varied over the course of time.

"Professional Scribes"

The second "spectrum" under review is that between professional scribes and non-professional writers. In order to address this issue, the point should be made that, even if scribes in Roman Egypt no longer enjoyed the same high status and role that they did in pre-Hellenistic times,13 they still played a key role in the production of written material of all kinds as they engaged in the "craft" of writing.14 This is not always appreciated, but there is good evidence to support it.

First, in antiquity artisans were trained by master craftsmen, sometimes taking an apprentice from outside the family.15 One apprenticeship contract is with a shorthand writer for two years (*P.Oxy.* IV 724, AD 155), and there may well have been apprenticeships for scribes of other kinds. Slave scribes were sometimes trained at the behest of their masters "to improve their ability at shorthand transcription, their calligraphy, or their accuracy."16 Second, the wages of scribes were sometimes regulated like other artisans, so that *SB* XX 14599 (II AD) mentions two rates of pay for writing, and the Edict of Diocletian (AD 301) regulated the wages of scribes, with two rates of pay for "best writing" and "second-quality writing."17

17 Turner, *op.cit.* (above, n. 4) 1. For the text (col.7, ll.39–41) see M. Giacchero, *Edictum Diocletiani et Collegarum de*
Third, scribes were sometimes hired to perform certain tasks, as shown by P.Mich. XI 603 (AD 134; contract for nine scribes to prepare copies of the population lists of Arsinoe) and P.Mich. 604 (AD 223; contract for the hire of a secretary). Fourth, scribes sometimes "went on strike," such as in 119/118 BC in the Egyptian village of Kerkeosiris. They were a group whose occupation was to write, especially to keep records, and they were not easily replaced. Fifth, writing depended on having the necessary implements - a pen (or stylus), a palette of dried ink, a knife to sharpen the pen, etc. The rarity of these may be indicated by the fact that they are only rarely mentioned in papyri, but in any case it was probably unusual for anyone except trained scribes and people of elite status and education to possess writing implements, although perhaps more likely than someone other than a stone cutter having the tools to carve on stone. Sixth, Roman grave inscriptions mentioning the occupation of the deceased refer to a range of "scribal" occupations, and the same kinds of tasks, both governmental and private, were performed in the towns and villages of Egypt. Being a scribe was an occupation.

Thus, although Harris' figures may need some qualification, it is widely accepted that in Egypt most of the rural population could neither read nor write, a tiny minority could write complete texts, a larger group of "slow writers" could just write their signature on documents, but most people relied on someone else to write the full text of a document for them because they themselves were completely illiterate. For example, Timotheos wrote for Aurelius Ptoleminos ἀγγαμάτου ὀντός ("as he is illiterate") (P.Mich. X 596, AD 372). We would expect then, that it was not just in late antique Egypt that towns had "ubiquitous public scribes," to whom the rest of the population resorted when they needed writing done.

Therefore, being a scribe was a craft, an occupation which required certain tools of the trade and took time to master, and whose rates of pay were sometimes regulated like those of other occupations. So, it would seem, as with other crafts, that a majority of the craft activity – in this case writing, especially

periπis rerum vanalium (Genova 1974) 153.

19 Turner, op.cit. (above, n. 4) 4–7; Cribiore, op.cit. (above, n. 13) 147–159.
20 R. Bagnall, Egypt in Late Antiquity (Princeton 1993) 44 gathers the few references in the papyri (n. 218), but notes that there might not have been a need to mention such things.
21 Cribiore, op.cit. (above, n. 7) 152 alludes to P.Leid.Inst. 25.15 (mid IV AD), noting that Aurelius Antonios was "fortunate enough" to own a waxed tablet.
23 Cf. Cornelius Nepos, At. 13.3. Lewis, op.cit. (above, n. 14) 135 alludes to a rich Roman family residing in Alexandria, which included amongst the slaves "six trained as stenographers, two copyists or secretaries, a scribe."
26 Bagnall, op.cit. (above, n. 20) 241–244 with respect to late antiquity.
28 Bagnall, op.cit. (above, n. 20) 91.
29 Bagnall, op.cit. (above, n. 20) 247.
copying literary texts – was done by scribes of various levels of training and expertise, whose occupation was to write day by day in a variety of contexts.30

"Non-Professional Writers"

On the other hand, the work of non-professional writers may be seen in a number of contexts, first in Schubart's "persönliche" script in a signature or a few lines of subscription at the end of documents such as in P.Rein. I 18 (petition, 108 BC) and P.Batav. 7B (land sale contract, 109 BC). It must have been extremely rare for such people to copy works of literature, but what about those who could write tolerably, who had been educated at least to a basic level (but not as scribes)? After all, the first steps in education were learning to write and read. So, who were these "writers," who could write tolerably? Were there many of them, and did they do much writing, especially of literary texts? There are four points to be made.

First, the number of MSS from archives in Egypt and elsewhere is quite large.31 While these include many MSS written by scribes, they also include a significant number written by the people who composed them. According to Seider, a letter from Zenon (P.Cair.Zen. I 59129, 256 BC) is written in his own hand,32 and this does not appear to have been unique, either to Zenon or to other writers in such archives. In the archive of Aurelia Charite (IV AD) some of her correspondence is in her own hand, although apparently she had scribes write her documents most of the time.33 In a letter of Achillion (P.Oxy. XLII 3067, III AD) he is seen to have dictated his letter to a secretary, who wrote it out in "a handsome chancery script," and then Achillion signed it "in a much less elegant fist."34 Clearly, there were a number of "writers" – business people and the like – who were able to write tolerably well for such purposes, although the services of scribes were frequently called upon, and not just in Ptolemaic times.35 Their ability to write came from schooling, but this was open only to those with resources to pay.36 Since this was presumably a small minority, mostly the children of elite and sub-elite families, their number must have been small compared to the total population.

Second, while such upper class people did sometimes write their own documents, they mostly did not write all of their documents, and, as in Rome, probably did not often occupy themselves with copying out

31 The online Leuven Homepage of Papyrus Archives (accessed 19.02.2008) lists 375 archives with Greek texts, some with only a small number but others with many more. The Zenon archive alone contains 1754 certain and 2 uncertain items.
32 R. Seider, Paläographie der Griechischen Papyri (Stuttgart 1990) III.1 193–195 (incl. II Abb.31).
33 Criboire, op.cit. (above, n. 7) 156 describes her hand as "not very experienced, showing the lack of fluency and unevenness of people for whom writing was not a frequent occupation."
34 P.J. Parsons, City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish (London 2007) 123.
35 R.S. Bagnall and R. Criboire, Women’s Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC – AD 800 (Ann Arbor 2006) 42 note that about two-thirds of the women’s letters in Greek were "written by someone other than the named author, mainly from dictation" and (p. 44) one-third in a secretarial hand.
36 Parsons, op.cit. (above, n. 34) 141–142 refers to P.Oxy. III 531 (II AD), in which a father wrote to his son away at school, mentioning an array of clothing (white cloaks, and purple, mulberry and scarlet capes) which clearly places them in elite circles. Cf. P. van Minnen, "Boorish or Bookish? Literature in Egyptian Villages in the Fayum in the Graeco-Roman Period," JJP 28 (1998) 99–184.
works of literature (cf. Cicero, *Att. 12.14, 12.40, 12.44*). This task was reserved for slaves or hired scribes, if an elite Roman (or Egyptian, presumably) wanted that done. Of course, those with fewer resources had to do their own copying, and some others from sub-elites might do so. But the point still stands that the writing of documents could well be done by business people and others of elite or sub-elite class in Alexandria, or in the towns (and perhaps villages) of Egypt, but they did not often, if at all, copy out works of literature.

In his study of literary rolls from Oxyrhynchus, Johnson assigned numbers from 1 to 3 to the hands that copied them. In his list of all such Greek rolls the number of hands assigned to the three categories is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prose texts: certain</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prose texts: uncertain</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prose texts: total</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verse texts: certain</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verse texts: uncertain</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verse texts: total</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, it was far less common for literary works to be copied by unprofessional (55 total) than professional hands (300 total). At Oxyrhynchus several hundred copyists of literary works have been identified, probably many of them local. We know of one instance of a scribe being paid to copy out Aristophanes' *Plutus* and Sophocles' *Third Thyestes*. *SB XX 14599* (1st half III AD) refers to a copyist paid 12 drachmas for copying three classical dramas (4000 lines of verse). Since it was uncommon for those who were not professional scribes to copy out works of literature, and since we know that scribes of various kinds did so, we should assume that a papyrus containing a work of literature was written by a professional "scribe," unless there is evidence to the contrary.

Third, Johnson's study of literary papyri from Oxyrhynchus shows that there are many more hands

---

38 The private circles in which books might be copied (although even here scribes might be utilised) are evident in *P.Oxy. XVIII 2192* (late II AD).
39 D. J. Thompson, "Ptolemaios and the "Lighthouse": Greek Culture in the Memphite Serapeum," *PCPhS* 213 = n.s. 33 (1987) 105–121 notes that Apollonios and his brother Ptolemaios copied Greek literature in the mid second century BC with varying degrees of ability.
40 Johnson, *op.cit.* (above, n. 3) 161. Here 1 designates "formal, semi-formal, or pretentious hands," 2 is for "informal and unexceptional (but for the most part probably professional)," and 3 is for "substandard or cursive" hands.
41 Where a MS has been recorded with two possibilities, e.g. "2? (or 3?)," I have recorded both possibilities, but in the "uncertain" category. This results in a certain amount of duplication, but does not affect the overall picture.
42 Johnson, *op.cit.* (above, n. 3) 160.
44 Parsons, *op.cit.* (above, n. 34) 156–157.
assigned to category 2 than category 3 and (especially in prose texts) more than category 1. It follows, as we have seen, that the scribes who copied literary texts were rarely unprofessional writers, but it also follows that the majority of the scribes were not highly professional either (127:61 for prose texts and 58:54 for verse texts). Papyri from the middle group of scribes (or hands) are much more common, especially for prose texts. Therefore, for any group of MSS containing literary texts we would expect to find a large proportion of them, especially in prose texts, professionally produced (but not "calligraphic"), only a small proportion of highly "professional" (or "calligraphic") copies, and a much smaller proportion of texts copied by non-professional writers (presumably, mostly those who could write tolerably). Thus, Johnson wrote of the "dominance, indeed, near uniformity, of professionalism" in the production of literary rolls, although no doubt there were levels of training and competence even among such "professionals."

Fourth, with respect to papyri from Roman Egypt modern writers refer to hands in certain kinds of texts, such as literary texts or letters, each with their own different practices and requirements. How can we then categorize the hands of writers in Graeco-Roman Egypt? For women's letters Bagnall and Cribiore distinguish between three different categories of hands: (1) "Professional Hands: Epistolary, Documentary and Literary;" (2) "Secretarial Hands;" and (3) "Personal Hands." For literary rolls we have noted Johnson's three categories of hands above. In literary papyri with annotations McNamee offers the two extremes of "distinctive hands" as "fine" and "personal" with the vast majority between these extremes. Excluding the "personal scripts" of those who could only just subscribe documents and confining ourselves to literary papyri, it would seem reasonable then to distinguish between three categories of writers. These are not precise, but they do provide some categories to work with.

1. Professional scribes, who could write calligraphically but also in more informal hands. These scribes could presumably write documents, but their distinctive hand is discernible in calligraphic copies of literary works.

2. Professional scribes, who could write less formally for certain purposes. The difference between this group and the first would then be a difference in quality but, as we have seen, this group was responsible for the majority of extant literary papyri.

3. Writers who had some education, and who could write tolerably well. A number of McNamee's

---

45 Johnson, op.cit. (above, n. 3) 160. He takes the Aristotle Constitution of Athens papyrus (BL, pap.131v, I AD) to be a rare exception.
46 Bagnall and Cribiore, op.cit. (above, n. 35) 42–45. They describe "professional hands" as including the "unabashedly documentary" (e.g. P.Oxy. IX 1217, IV AD), fast documentary hands, and professional chancery hands. "Secretarial hands" are described as "legible, well-spaced handwriting" ... "experienced but without the degree of elegance and professionalism of a scribal hand." "Personal hands" include the hands of those for whom "writing was not a daily activity," ranging from some "only slightly less practiced than some of the secretarial ones" to "evolving" or "alphabetical" hands, showing "severe and consistent problems with writing."
47 K. McNamee, Annotations in Greek and Latin Texts from Egypt. Am.Stud.Pap. XLV (New Haven 2007) 514–529 records the "distinctive script" for 33 MSS out of the total of 293. Only 15 are called "fine" and 18 (+ 1 uncertain) "personal." The remaining 259 (260) are then between these extremes. She refers (pp. 21–22) to these two extremes as "extremely elegant and professional" hands or "very informal, personal copies" (see Pl. 22), and notes that most lie somewhere in between.
48 Johnson's first, and McNamee's "fine" group.
49 Bagnall and Cribiore's first and second (secretarial), Johnson's second, and McNamee's middle group.
50 On the general issue of discerning a scribe's hand from that of an elite or sub-elite writer such as a business person,
"personal" group (e.g. Pl. 22, PSI I 110, Sallust, IV AD) would be at the lower end of skill in this group. These writers were not professional scribes, but could write or subscribe documents, although they rarely copied literature.

Thus, since scribal professionalism results in a number of features of MSS which we may call "regularities" in comparison to the "irregularities" visible in MSS written by non-professional scribes, it would seem fair to posit a spectrum between the most regular work of a professional scribe and the most irregular work of an ordinary writer.

**Relationship Between Writer and Writing**

Finally, how did the nature of the writer (professional scribe or untrained writer) relate to the writing style in which he or she wrote (book hand or documentary hand)? The non-professional copyists of Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens* papyrus did not use a bookhand, which suggests that only "scribes" did so. Evidence from the APIS database tends to support this. Only five of the forty-one Greek MSS on the APIS database (July 2007) from the fourth century BC to the fourth century AD which are specifically noted as being written in "literary hand" were possibly written by a non-professional writer. As for papyri listed as being in "book hand," ten out of forty-one might show signs of non-professional production, but only a few, such as the "eccentric" hand of a papyrus of the *Odyssey* (*P.Col. VIII 200; III–II BC*), need be seen in that way. Therefore, it does appear that MSS written in a formal book hand were normally written by trained scribes, who could write documents but also copy out works of literature.

**Conclusion**

It seems inappropriate to use the term "spectrum" to describe writing styles, even though we may speak of the two broad fields of "book hand" and "documentary hand," each generally used for certain genres of text. With respect to writers, it does seem reasonable to speak of a "spectrum" between the best work of a professional scribe and the worst effort of a non-professional writer. On the issue of the relationship between writing style and a writer's training, only trained scribes were able to use a good book-hand although not always with the same calligraphic quality.

---

51 Johnson, *op. cit.* (above, n. 3) 157–158.
52 Johnson, *op. cit.* (above, n. 3) 157.
53 For example, the hand of *P.Mich. III 144* (fragment of algebraic problems; II AD) is "very irregular."
54 Amongst them, *P.Mich. inv.1318 = ZPE 46* (1982) 71–72 (Homeric papyrus; III AD) is written in "large, slightly irregular and somewhat crowded uncials" (image accessed on APIS).
55 *P.Oxy. XXXI 2604* (III AD) shows a scribe practising various types of script: chancery script (1st line), a similar style but of larger size (2nd line), and large round uncials of more archaic type (3rd line). Cf. *P.Oxy. LXVIII 4669* (scribal practice and draft, I/II AD?). Cribiore, *op. cit.* (above, n. 7) 153 writes of the "foundation or basic script that appears in the writing samples of students, semiliterates, and individuals who occasionally used writing." She goes on to say, that "Some of the school exercises display the process by which students, departing from a basic script that was in the background, learned to imitate more formal 'book hands.'"