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Ancient Bookrolls in Modern Classrooms

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Our students can easily forget that books in the ancient Greek and Roman world were radically different from the objects we call “books” today. A modern book comes in what is called the codex form. That book is mechanically printed on machine-made paper and bound by machine. Each copy in a publisher’s print run is identical. Numbered pages turn, and blank spaces divide the text’s words, which are also equipped with standardized punctuation and upper- and lower-case letters to provide additional help to the reader. An ancient book, by contrast, was individually written on hand-created papyrus sheets glued together into rolls long enough to contain, say, one book of the *Aeneid*. There was no pagination or standardized punctuation, although a reader might add marks to his or her text in much the same way an actor today might add notes to a play’s script. The words, written entirely in capital letters, would flow in a single line across a column, without word division.

That description could help students understand ancient books theoretically, but it would be easy for them to slip back, unconsciously, into thinking of ancient books as simply old modern books. How can we help our students appreciate the physical nature of ancient texts and think about the effects of ancient books’ physical form on ancient literature? The answer lies in hands-on experience and observation, as I found when I taught Roman Poems and Poetry Books (Latin 302).

Early in the term, we spent a class period in Wellesley College’s Special Collections (<http://www.wellesley.edu/lts/collections/speccoll>). The students began by looking at modern codex-form books (I passed out copies of Loeb Classical Library editions of Latin authors, so that everyone would be looking at roughly similar

books). Going around the seminar table, they made observations about the physical form and visual presentation of their books, to sharpen their eyes for things they normally take for granted, like page numbers, paragraphing, lower- and upper-case letters, and punctuation. Then we did the same thing with fragments of ancient papyri from Oxyrhynchus, a thank-you gift from the Egypt Exploration Society for a donation long ago. Even though the papyrus fragments were usually small and, to the students' untrained eyes, illegible (especially if they didn't know Greek, the language of most of Wellesley's papyri), the class quickly noted some of the major differences, like the lack of word division. The battered papyri also showed the students how far away the ancient world is in time, how much a text's survival could depend on chance, and how tough papyrus sheets could be, especially compared to much modern paper made from wood pulp (would their Psyc 101 notebooks or the *Boston Globe* last 2,000 years?). I am lucky to be able to have my students study real papyrus fragments, but the same basic approach could be used with images of ancient papyri available on the internet in the Duke Papyrus Archive (<https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/papyrus/>) or the University of Michigan's Papyrology Collection (<https://www.lib.umich.edu/papyrology-collection>).

Having examined the ancient papyri in Special Collections, a couple of weeks later we trooped over to Wellesley's Book Arts Lab to make our own sheets of papyrus. For homework, the students had watched the slide show "Papyrus Making 101: rediscovering the craft of making ancient paper" on the University of Michigan Papyrology Collection website (<https://www.lib.umich.edu/papyrus-making/index.html>). To highlight the contrast with modern paper-making, they also watched a video on modern industrial paper-making (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4C3X26dxbM>) from Sappi, "A leading global provider of sustainable woodfibre products and solutions" (in the words of its website at <https://www.sappi.com/>).

Fortunately, making sheets of papyrus is easy: no complicated set-up, no fancy equipment, no dangerous chemicals. A materials list for the sheets themselves consists of two things: strips of papyrus and a bucket of water. If you happen to have a ready source of papyrus plants (probably not likely, although we were lucky to be able to call on the Wellesley College greenhouses), you could harvest your own papyrus, cut its stalks into appropriate lengths, and then shave strips down the length of the stalk. Alternatively, go to the King Tut Shop (<http://www.kingtutshop.com/>), where you can order either a Make Papyrus at Home Kit or simply strips of papyrus (King Tut Shop says it can accept school purchase orders). The Kit, which includes

enough papyrus strips to make three sheets (i.e., enough to demonstrate but not to have your class make their own sheets), a small press, and some absorbent cotton sheets, will come with its own instructions, but I would suggest simply ordering as large a quantity of strips as you will need for your class or Latin Club and making a simple press yourself (see below).

When you are ready to have your class make their sheets of papyrus, set out small buckets of water containing strips of papyrus (the water keeps the strips flexible). On a waterproof surface, set out for each student or pair of students a cloth somewhat larger than the sheet to be made. To create a single sheet (and the fact that all this work will produce only one sheet is significant), the student will arrange strips of papyrus side by side on the cloth vertically (i.e., with the length of the strip at right angles to their body). When enough strips have been laid down to make the width of the sheet, lay other strips on top of the first layer, side by side, aligned with each other, at right angles to the first layer (i.e., parallel to the long edge of the table). Your students may instinctively want to interweave the two layers of strips: ask them why that would not be helpful (it would create a lumpy surface for writing).

When all the strips have been laid down, the sheets have been created, but the papyrus is still wet and the layers would come apart if you picked the sheet up. So the next step is pressing and drying the sheets, which will remove the moisture and cause the plant fibres' natural adhesive to fuse the layers together. For this you will need a simple press. If your school has a shop, a press may be available, but you can also create your own press. In an area that can get wet or in a broad, flat container, set down a sturdy board a little larger than the size of the sheets your students have made. On top of the board, lay down a sheet of absorbent material such as felt or an old white cotton tee-shirt. Then carefully pick up the cloth under a papyrus sheet and turn the sheet out onto the felt. Place another layer of felt or another old white cotton tee-shirt on top of it. Repeat those steps until all of your students' papyrus sheets have been stacked up with layers of felt in between them. Place a final layer of material on top, and then set another board, the same size as the bottom board, on top of the entire stack. The layers of material will absorb excess water from the papyrus sheets. Carefully place a significant weight on top of the stack. (If you want to get the Physical Education Department involved, ask the coach if you can borrow a weight plate from a set of free weights.) Over time, the papyrus sheets will dry out, and the pressure of the weight will both speed up the process and prevent the sheets from warping.

Now it is only a matter of time. A couple of times a day for as long as it takes,

remove the weight from the top of the stack and replace the now-sodden felts with dry felts (you can re-use the felts after they have dried out—ask the art teacher if you can use a drying rack, or get a cheap drying rack).

As your students make their papyrus sheets and, if my experience is any guide, have fun playing with water in the middle of Latin class, they can talk about the practical implications of this mode of production compared to modern industrial paper-making. For instance:

The process is simple and requires no complicated equipment and no external power source.

The process is ecologically sound: no potentially toxic chemicals are used, and no harmful effluents are produced

The process is labor-intensive. Each sheet is created one-by-one by an individual person. How much work would it take to make a 500-sheet stack of papyrus sheets, comparable to the ream of paper you could buy today for a relatively modest amount?

Making papyrus sheets requires, obviously, papyrus plants: it cannot easily be done everywhere.

Making their own sheets of papyrus will help your students understand the physical form of the bookroll in antiquity, and since we are all teaching Latin and Greek we can turn to ancient texts to illustrate some of the effects that the roll form had on ancient literature. Many of the readings in my Roman Poems and Poetry Books course complemented our studies in Special Collections and the Book Arts Lab. I tried to keep the focus on the physical and to separate cultural conventions from issues of physical form. For instance, the absence of word division was a cultural choice, not a necessity of the roll form. It presents a problem for a modern reader at first, but was it a hindrance for an experienced ancient reader? Beginning or inexperienced readers might be challenged, but they would get used to their texts relatively quickly, and the use of a *lector* or professional reader-aloud would make reading even easier, since the “reader” would not actually be reading but rather listening to a professional read.

A simple illustration of the power and the literary potential of the scroll form

lies in the arrangement of poems in a book roll. In a modern poetry book, one usually reads from the front to the back and then closes the book after reading the final poem. In an ancient poetic book roll, too, one would still read from the first poem in the roll to the last, but when the reader reached the end of the roll s/he would reread the scroll back to the first poem. That meant, in practice, that immediately after reading the last poem the reader would then re-encounter the first poem, highlighting connections between the two poems. Have your class read opening and closing poems and look for connections.

Another example based on the physical form of modern and ancient literature: in a modern poetry book there is no physical need to read poems in sequence, since pages can be turned easily, quickly, and in bunches, but an ancient book roll imposes its sequence on the reader: you cannot get to the eighth poem, for example, without passing across the seventh poem. The roll form, therefore, could emphasize connections between contiguous poems and make the reader particularly sensitive to them, especially since more than one poem could be visible to the reader at the same time as s/he held the roll in both hands and unrolled it as s/he read. Ovid exploits this potential in his *Cypassis* poems (*Amores* 2.7 and 2.8), where the first poem, addressed to his lover, rebukes her for even suspecting that the poet could be having an affair with her slave, while the second, addressed to the slave, reveals that her mistress had discovered their affair and threatens to reveal all if the slave stops cooperating.

After talking about Roman books and reading some Latin poems, it is a good time to start unpacking what we mean when we use terms like “modern book,” because there our students may have a lot to teach us. What does “modern book” mean to them? A text on a Kindle or on a phone? an electronic textbook rented for the term? What are the similarities between electronic books and codex books as well as ancient papyrus book rolls? An electronic book, for instance, scrolls like a papyrus bookroll, but it does not require sequential reading. What about a PDF file? A general rule of thumb is that for the first fifty years a new form imitates the form it is replacing, just as the earliest printed books often imitated the format and conventions of manuscript books. A PDF file tries to duplicate, electronically, a printed page, the very form an electronic text could replace. What do your students read? How do the forms in which they read influence both the way their texts are written and the way they are read? Those questions can start in a bucket of water filled with strips of papyrus.⁴

4 Many years of thanks go to Ruth Rogers and Katherine Ruffin.