

Classical Literature and Society

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CLASSICAL LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

The Roman Book

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Format wars: scroll v. codex, papyrus v. parchment, pagan v. Christian

As a physical object, the Roman 'book' was a papyrus scroll, referred to in Latin as a *volumen*. The scroll, or book-roll, was the bulk-standard medium for writing all over the ancient Mediterranean world, inside or outside the Roman territories, and therefore of prime cultural and practical importance in all societies of that richly endowed area.¹ Papyrus had provided a writing material dating back to the earliest millennia of Egyptian history. Indeed, in Egypt papyrus was in continuous use for about 4,000 years, from c. 3000 BCE to c. 1000 CE: regular manufacture ceased around the end of the eleventh century.² Only towards the end of the Western Roman Empire was the scroll format itself substantially displaced by the codex format that is the basis of the modern book. The Romans did use other writing vehicles for certain purposes, such as linen,³ ivory,⁴ waxed tablets or notebooks using a sharp-ended stylus to incise letters into the wax,⁵ and post-card sized slivers of wood.⁶ But for all the period we are interested in, roughly the 200 years during which Rome produced its most admired literature, papyrus 'paper' and the scroll made from it remained the dominant carrier for texts of any length or cultural pretension, as well as for administration, law, and the processes of government. Papyrus was therefore *a* or *the* fundamental instrument for learning and literature, perhaps indeed of civilisation itself. The elder Pliny, having described the process of papyrus manufacture, declared that

in the use of this material [papyrus] the culture and history of mankind are pre-eminently embodied.⁷

Nor did the use of papyrus die out quickly once the codex made of parchment became the norm. As late as the sixth century, the emperor Justinian's law codes were distributed on papyrus as well as on parchment,⁸ and there is an example of the 'hybrid' papyrus codex carrying works by St Augustine that dates to the seventh or eighth centuries.⁹ Indeed, papyrus continued in use for centuries after the decline of the Western Roman Empire.¹⁰ The word 'papyrus' is of course the root of the modern English word 'paper' and its equivalents in some other languages.¹¹

But in discussion of the Roman equivalent of a 'book', especially as a vehicle for literary or learned texts, there has been a frequent if not always

explicit assumption that the later codex book format, with vellum or (today) paper as its main material, is *and in principle always was* intrinsically superior to the papyrus scroll. The scroll could after all be bulky (the diameter of a wine-bottle for a standard 10-metre roll¹²), fragile, difficult to handle, hard to search for facts or references, and even more so because of the absence of systematic punctuation or (in the later part of the period) even breaks between words. There were no pages in a scroll, no page numbers, and no chapter headings or other reader aids that we nowadays take for granted. There was therefore no way of referencing or cross-referencing the contents of a Roman book.

So the question has been posed – why did the Romans retain for so long a book format that seems to many today to be so comparatively impractical? Were the Romans just obtuse, or at best retrogressively conservative, in retaining for centuries the allegedly ‘impractical’ papyrus scroll as their standard carrier of literary and many non-literary writings? Why did the Romans of the time not adopt the codex format, on papyrus or on another medium, when (as the evidence seems to show) they knew perfectly well that there were alternatives to both the physical medium, papyrus, and to the format, the scroll?

The reason is, I maintain, that papyrus was not in fact inherently and markedly inferior to parchment, or indeed to paper, as a vehicle for texts used in large quantities, and that the scroll was not inherently and markedly inferior to the codex as a format for ‘books’. If the Romans were well aware, at least from the end of the first century CE, of the codex format as an alternative to the scroll, and of parchment as an alternative material to papyrus, but chose to retain the papyrus scroll, it was because by cultural choice they liked and valued the scroll just as it was – so much so that they did not even feel the need to develop the papyrus scroll to the full potential of which it was capable. To understand this, and to begin to rebuild an authentic picture of the Roman book world, we need to go back to basics, starting with the physical properties of the scroll.

The scroll as cultural artefact

The Roman scroll or book-roll¹³ was made from glued-together sheets of papyrus made from the papyrus water-plant that grew only in Egypt. It was rolled up at both ends onto two wooden rods or rollers, thus requiring both hands to unroll, read it, and (with the left hand) re-roll the part already perused or not wanted. There were knobs at the two ends of the rod by which to roll/unroll the scroll, which were often colourful, as befits a prestige object.¹⁴ There was a blank sheet of papyrus at the beginning and end of the best-made scrolls, to help preserve them from wear and tear.¹⁵ The final sheet could also carry an end-title of the book,¹⁶ while the author himself might start his text with words that acted as a front title page, so that readers at both ends of the scroll knew what they were

reading. The better or presentation copies were kept inside elegant cylindrical wrappers or covers¹⁷ made of leather or cloth, possibly in purple,¹⁸ with a colourful identity label or title-tag attached,¹⁹ and put on shelves or in leather book boxes a bit like capacious umbrella stands.²⁰

Scrolls could be long – but how long? The longest surviving (Egyptian) scroll is over 43 metres in length.²¹ The general opinion has been that the typical Roman scroll was about 10 metres long. However, Johnson’s work on the Oxyrhynchus fragments suggests that the ‘normative range’ may have been more like 3 to 15 metres.²² This has occasioned much argument²³ about the elder Pliny’s statement²⁴ that there were never more than 20 papyrus sheets to a *scapus*. What was a *scapus*? Some have interpreted it as meaning the scroll itself, and then pointed out that Pliny apparently did not know what he was talking about,²⁵ since 20 papyrus sheets of average size would make a roll of only some 5 metres in length, which seems to be contradicted by the evidence. Was Pliny too credulous of his sources, or did he fail to observe the characteristics of the very medium to which he committed the huge number of books²⁶ that he churned out so diligently, including the very one that tells us about papyrus? Or did he just mean ‘most commonly available size’ of roll as placed on the market?²⁷

The simplest translation of *scapus* is ‘stalk’,²⁸ and since Pliny is talking about the production process, it is perfectly possible that he is saying that one papyrus stalk cannot yield more than, or usually yields, 20 usable sheets. I see no reason why Pliny should not be giving us accurate detail about the manufacture and sale of papyrus ‘paper’. It was a simple standard unit of the primary stage of manufacture,²⁹ which could translate during secondary manufacture by the purchaser into any numbers of individual sheets or lengths of rolls, by cutting up or pasting together.

The manufacture of papyrus

It is the elder Pliny in his *Natural History* who gives us the classic account of the making of papyrus paper in his day.³⁰ To summarise Pliny – the stalk, or pith, of the tall papyrus plant³¹ was separated into long thin flat strips.³² These strips of fibre were made into large sheets of ‘paper’ by laying one set of strips left-to-right on top of another set of fibres running top-to-bottom, then sticking them together to make a solid sheet. Pliny says that Nile water was itself gummy enough to stick the fibres together as the sheets were put through some sort of press: others doubt this, and argue that some sort of gum must have been used.³³

These large primary sheets could then be cut into individual sheets of a usable and regular size and either left as separate sheets, or stuck together end-to-end to form a scroll or roll. The inner surface was smoothed by rubbing with a pumice stone or, says Pliny, by beating with a mallet. Pliny also tells us that, just as there are different grades of paper today, there were different grades of papyrus paper, with different ‘brand

names', depending on which of the papyrus fibres were used – outer or inner, coarser or finer. The coarsest grade might also be used as wrapping paper by shopkeepers. But the better stuff, with ends neatly squared off, was valued for 'fineness, firmness, whiteness and smoothness'³⁴ and provided a carrier of greater or lesser prestige both for any writings with literary and social ambitions, and for the routine administration and public and private record keeping of the empire.

The qualities of papyrus

Papyrus 'paper' made in this way has been criticised for its vulnerability. It was, say its critics, inherently fragile.³⁵ It could discolour, be torn, be subject to damp, mould and worm,³⁶ be eaten by mice or other rodents, get burnt in a fire. A Roman library, without fire alarms or sprinklers, must have been a major fire hazard. Libraries were indeed regularly, and tragically, burnt down. But all the same comments can be made equally forcefully about modern paper, which is reliant on wood pulp, or in some cases certain types of grass, with a chemical admixture, and can easily be torn, discoloured, used as nesting material by mice, rotted by damp, burnt in fires. Modern paper's compensating advantages are cheapness, ubiquity, flexibility, clarity of text presentation – and the ease with which (perhaps to the detriment of the environment) it can be discarded. Can the same be said about Roman papyrus 'paper'? I suggest that it can. Papyrus 'paper' had just the same advantages of ubiquity, clarity and (for those who mattered) cheapness, and vulnerability to fire, damp and mice could up to a point be countered by careful storage and by treating the papyrus with cedar oil.³⁷ But the main point is that this vulnerability, while real, is no more to be considered a fatal objection to papyrus than it is to modern paper.

The papyrus accepted Roman ink (made from blocks of soot or lamp-black mixed with gum, or gall nuts and iron vitriol, then moistened with water³⁸) perfectly well, and the physical 'marks on paper' made by the *calamus* or reed pen, i.e. letters and numbers, have survived the centuries without much fading provided only that the scroll itself has survived.³⁹ Nor is it necessarily true that papyrus 'paper' naturally degraded and self-destructed. The papyrus 'paper' itself can, in the right conditions, survive for enormous periods of time, as witnessed both by Roman writers,⁴⁰ and by the (few) surviving papyrus writings dating back to the third century, and by the everyday documents discarded into the rubbish dumps of Roman Egypt,⁴¹ where the extreme dryness of the climate has preserved them for many centuries for the curious gaze of posterity. It may be true that parchment of good quality is the finest writing material ever devised.⁴² But papyrus paper, like modern paper, was a mass medium by contemporary Roman standards, something that lent itself to common use for a wide variety of applications, in different grades of quality. Parchment was not that, either in Roman times or thereafter.

The overall picture that presents itself is therefore one of the great utility of papyrus 'paper' (as indeed of papyrus in other uses), lasting over a long period of history, akin to the utility of modern paper, with no inherent presumption that it was an inferior medium at the technical level. In my judgement, there is nothing about the properties of papyrus that makes it obviously undesirable as a medium for writing, even if you accept modern paper as the comparator. Significantly, while complaints about the quality of copying are frequent among Roman authors, complaints about the quality or price of papyrus 'paper' are non-existent.

It seems fair to conclude that the papyrus produced in the ancient factories had, and retained for years and years, the following qualities: it was white (or slightly coloured), flexible, and durable, and its surface was shiny and smooth. It was not for lack of these qualities that papyrus gave way to parchment and paper, but because these other materials were better able, with the passage of time, to meet the needs and conditions of different times and places for written and eventually the printed word.⁴³

I return to the 'needs and conditions of different times and places' later in this chapter.

The cost and economics of papyrus

Established Egyptian, Greek, and Roman trade routes would have carried made-up papyrus from Egypt to wherever there was a demand, especially when the Roman imperial regime, by controlling piracy,⁴⁴ had made the Mediterranean safer for long-distance sea transport than it had been before or was ever to be for centuries thereafter. Merchant ships could have carried not only wine, corn and olive oil, slaves and horses, for which there is abundant evidence from sunken ships as well as the written record, but also papyrus rolls, which would have rotted and so left no trace in shipwrecks. So there can be little doubt that, given its centuries of use in the Graeco-Roman world, papyrus was as ubiquitous as would-be writers on it. Its flexibility is demonstrated by the varieties of uses to which papyrus 'paper' was put – not just literary and learned works of all kinds, but practical documents of all kinds, particularly relating to imperial administration and taxation.

Did this mean that papyrus was cheap – or expensive? Or did (as some argue⁴⁵) the increasing efficiency of production drive down the price over time? 'Cheapness' is a relative and subjective term whose meaning depends on relative and comparative costs and prices, disposable incomes, and the price of alternative goods. We have scant evidence about any of these aspects for the Roman Empire. For the price of parchment, we have a figure in Diocletian's famous edict on prices of 301 CE.⁴⁶ But unfortunately the equivalent entry for papyrus is virtually lost. Even then, these

figures would have been after the massive inflation that is thought to have hit the Roman world in the later third century, and so give little indication of prices before that. Lewis says,⁴⁷ in a summary of what evidence there is for Egypt, that

during most of classical antiquity, a roll of papyrus cost the equivalent of one or two days' wages, and it could run as high as what the labourer would earn in 5 or 6 days ... The Egyptian peasant who paid 200 drachmas for a simple abode was surely not buying papyrus rolls at 2 or 3 or 4 drachmas apiece ... But to the villager who paid 3 or 4 or 6 thousand drachmas in costs for his house, such papyrus prices could hardly have loomed large.

For even richer people, such papyrus costs would have been mere petty cash. Much the same picture could have held true for Rome and elsewhere, but still gives little idea of exactly where in the social pyramid affordability set in, and so how big the 'customer base' was. There is some, though scant and disputable, evidence about the shop price of 'books' (i.e. scrolls) for sale in Rome, but this again tells us little or nothing about the price at which the scribe or copyist/bookseller in Rome bought in his materials. But it seems safe, if speculative, to say that papyrus 'paper' would not have been ubiquitous for so long if it had been unaffordable to the people who needed to use it, even if the local market price in, say, Rome or Marseilles (Massilia) could have been itself a limitation on the number of those users. Moreover, given the immense comparative wealth both of the upper classes of the Roman Empire – the sort of people who wrote and read things – and of the emperor and his imperial administration – the sort of people who kept records – it would be surprising if the price of papyrus 'paper' was anything other than a trivial item, not least because the imperial regime was in a position to manipulate that price if they chose to do so, through command of the source of supply. In any case, the main cost of a literary papyrus probably lay in the cost of paying a good scribe to write the text, rather than in the cost of the material itself, at least as and when such scribes ceased to be slaves and became a paid profession. Such professional scribes were paid by the quality of their output. Diocletian's Edict on Prices also deals with scribes' wages⁴⁸. It says:

To a scribe for best writing, 100 lines, 25 denarii
For a second quality writing, 100 lines, 20 denarii
To a notary, for writing a petition or legal document, 100 lines, 10 denarii

For such high cost writing, space was liberally used to aid presentation,⁴⁹ also suggesting that the cost of the papyrus material was not an issue for those (presumably better-off) people who commissioned such copies.

Comparative cost of vellum

It is also relevant to this discussion of papyrus that the vellum/parchment which eventually displaced papyrus paper could not have been cheap to make. Discussion of the cost of production of vellum is bedevilled by confusion between leather and vellum. Both are animal skins, but real vellum requires much more treatment in cleaning, tanning, stretching and smoothing.⁵⁰ However, it has been calculated that a spring lamb, reckoned to provide the best quality skin for vellum, would yield a writing surface of only 30 x 60 centimetres, although older animals would produce much larger, but poorer quality, sheets. Nevertheless, a long roll or big codex would require the slaughter of many animals – hardly cheap. Even if these lambs were to be slaughtered anyway for food, the cost of treating the skins would have kept the cost of vellum high. So it is not obvious that papyrus 'paper' could be replaced as a mass medium by vellum purely on cost grounds.

But was the overall cost of the scroll itself too high by comparison? Cavallo argues that books in codex format were easier to make, so this shortened the production process and encouraging book circulation. The fact that the page could be written on both sides meant that putting out a given text in codex form made a big saving of space, he argues, thus lowering per copy costs in comparison with the scroll.⁵¹ But to the contrary, parchment books in the codex format were produced on a much smaller scale than the scroll, so per-copy costs (even if that concept is valid for Rome) would have been higher. The papyrus scroll was also very easy, and so cheap, to make. Having purchased or received some basic 20-sheet rolls, the scribe only needed as equipment only a pen, ink, sponge,⁵² knife and glue – and he was in business.⁵³ A basic scroll would also have been easier to lengthen or shorten than a papyrus codex, with its requirement for binding at the spine. So it is hard to believe that comparative costs were a serious factor in the eventual displacement of papyrus scroll by parchment codex. We have to look elsewhere for the reasons.

The scroll versus the codex

Since the codex 'won', and history is written by (and, in this case, on) the winner, it is not difficult to list certain things which you can indeed do with the codex which you could not, allegedly, do with the scroll. It is important, in this context, to separate the advantages of the codex as first used in the later Roman Empire, from those further advantages conferred upon the codex many centuries later by mechanical methods of printing. Moreover, it is easy to impute to the codex advantages – and to the scroll the corresponding disadvantages – which probably had little to do with technical formats and everything to do with cultural choices by writers, scribes and others about preferred methods of written presentation.

Take, as an example, page numbers. No modern book is without page numbers, and the codex book format lends itself to clear page numbering. The objectives are ease of reference and consistency of presentation between any two copies of the same book. The scroll did not have pages, and therefore no page numbering as such. This may partly explain why Roman historians and other writers did so little research (by our standards) – it was devilishly difficult to find anything. But this picture is not complete. In the age of manual copying, before mechanical reproduction, it was just as easy to have two copies of a work in codex format that differed in their page lengths and therefore page distribution, as it was to have two scrolls of the same work that differed from each other, and for the same reasons. The crucial difference must have come with the cultural and religious *need* to have consistent presentation of text, so that the copyist-scribes, like the Christian monks in the medieval monastic scriptoria, made it their business to end each page at the same place.

It is not at all obvious that the scroll could not have delivered the same effect, if it had become a requirement of textual convention, by consistently numbering the columns on the scroll (of which there is some evidence⁵⁴) and by making sure that the text on each column of each scroll ended in the same place as the one you were copying from – something which is if anything easier on a scroll because a scroll, unlike a book, can be extended in small steps by sticking a new sheet of papyrus onto the end of the scroll – or, of course, snipping off a bit at the end that you do not need.⁵⁵ Thus page numbering is not, as some claim, a unique and pivotal advantage of the codex, and therefore neither is its absence a necessary disadvantage of the scroll. Column numbering could have achieved similar aims – even if in practice it was not often done.

Saving of space is another supposed advantage of the codex. After all, in a book, you write on both sides of the paper, unlike the scroll, where you normally wrote on one side only, the 'recto', the side with the better writing surface. But it is not the case that you got two-for-one – twice the text for a given surface area. With the codex, the often generous margins that are needed top and bottom, left and right of the page swallow up a large proportion of the theoretically available extra space. And once again, did saving space matter, when the scroll could be so easily extended in small or large steps? Saving of space may have been a factor, but hardly a pivotal one.

A third advantage claimed for the early codex used by Christians, and therefore claimed as a reason for the 'victory' of the codex, is that it could be smaller and so easier to hide from the 'religious police' of Rome i.e. your nosy 'pagan' neighbours or adherents of a rival faith. You tucked it away, invisibly, into the folds of your toga or work clothes. But scrolls did not have to be the large objects depicted in Roman visual representations of the school-room or of poets reading (though they could be). They could also be as small as you cared to make them,⁵⁶ small enough to slip into a modern pocket – or into the folds of a toga.

I am driven to suggest that the claimed technical advantages of the codex over the scroll were at best relative rather than absolute, and that the eventual switch from one to the other was driven primarily by factors quite different to technical and functional characteristics – in other words, by cultural factors and cultural choice. The converse of that is that Roman retention of the scroll for as long as they did was also due to cultural choice. Contrary to what might be assumed, there was no inherent or necessary link between papyrus 'paper' and the scroll format in which it was normally used. In practice, of course, there was a strong link between the two, in that for centuries the two usually went hand-in-hand. But not always. The Romans knew about the codex book format by at least the middle of the period under review, but apparently chose not to use it as standard. Similarly, just as they knew about wood, linen, ivory and wax tablets as carriers of text, they knew about parchment – but apparently chose not to use it as standard. The evidence for both these assertions lies in the many mentions of *membrana*, i.e. parchment, in Martial's poems and epigrams, and the way in which he describes its use.⁵⁷

The evidence of Martial

It must be said that this evidence is not as solid as one might wish, and there has been much controversy about these references in Martial, but this has been more about the implication that the parchment codex format was in use in Martial's time for literary books than about the availability of parchment as such or the use of the codex format as such. After all, Suetonius gives us the curious detail that the last will and testament of the emperor Augustus was written on three scrolls and two codexes, and implies that these two codexes detailed all his substantial donations to family, servants, friends and the people of Rome.⁵⁸ So they cannot have been just a few wax-covered wooden tablets tied together, but rather substantial documents made of some material not specified.

The question then is whether the evidence of Martial is sufficient to bring together parchment and the codex format, and to disprove the traditional view that the parchment codex only became a serious alternative to the papyrus scroll two or even three centuries after. The key reference is a single one, and is in Martial 1.2.3, where he refers to this particular collection of his verses and epigrams as being not just on parchment (*membrana*) but also in a format not suitable for traditional book-boxes used to hold scrolls (*scrinia*) but suitable for holding in one hand (*manus una capit*). This suggests that Martial's Book 1, at least, was being presented to the reader on parchment rather than on papyrus, and not on a scroll, which requires two hands to use, but as a codex-style book that can be held in one hand.⁵⁹ The one piece of external evidence that is quoted in support of this interpretation is the fragment of parchment, written on both sides, known as the *De Bellis Macedonicis*, and now dated

to around 100 CE.⁶⁰ However, the dating of this fragment must be regarded as a best guess, and itself partly depends on interpretation of Martial.⁶¹ Thus this single statement by Martial remains the only serious witness to this aspect of the history of the Roman book.

But what sort of codex book was Martial referring to? Kenyon argues⁶² that Martial's repeated references to parchment cannot be used as evidence that parchment codices were in common use. His interpretation is that these were not ordinary copies, but miniatures of some sort, either extracts or epitomes. He points out, correctly, that Martial 14.186 is entitled *Virgil on Parchment*, and that Martial 14.188 is entitled *Cicero on Parchment*, while 14.190 is entitled *Livy on Parchment*. Even if one accepts that these objects may have had a codex format, they cannot, by the wildest stretch of the imagination, have included in one hand-held volume all of Virgil, let alone all of Cicero or all of Livy. Therefore they must have been miniatures, extracts or précis. Moreover, the very fact that parchment is mentioned at all, suggests Kenyon, means that these examples were unusual. In other words, these were not real books at all. Allen and colleagues⁶³ however take a different view, and argue that this 'edition' of Martial 'should be a landmark in the history of publication and of text criticism' because it marks the first entry of the codex parchment book onto the stage of the history of the book. Perhaps fortunately, both points of view support the main argument of this investigation. The papyrus scroll was and remained the dominant form, and the codex format was indeed unusual at that time. On the other hand, Martial's words do surely indicate clearly that Roman authors, copyists and booksellers of his time knew about the codex format using parchment, but only in unusual circumstances chose to use it. Even if these particular examples were shortened or miniature versions of some sort, it is hard to believe that this general style of book, the codex, could not have been extended into a larger format and into more frequent use – if the Romans had wanted to. It was a matter of cultural choice not to do so, and to retain the papyrus scroll as the dominant mode. Yet that very fact makes Martial's reference a 'landmark in the history of publication', just because it represents at least one moment in Roman history, perhaps the first such moment that we know about when that cultural choice was being made.

As if to confirm this argument, there are also early examples of a Roman-era codex made, not of parchment, but of papyrus.⁶⁴ The papyrus codex was not, as some scholars have written, a 'bastard form' or 'surrogate' for a 'proper' parchment or vellum codex. Rather

the papyrus roll, the papyrus codex, the parchment roll and the parchment codex were all perfectly adequate and acceptable forms of book.⁶⁵

The codex concept was there from at least Martial's time, alongside the scroll, and could have been enlarged and generalised much sooner than

actually happened, whether using papyrus or parchment. In short, cultural choices were being made between forms of book that were, in principle, all 'adequate and acceptable'.

The codex and the victory of Christianity

Understanding why the codex was not generalised earlier is made the more difficult because the eventual switch to the codex format was so closely tied up with the spread and ultimate 'victory' of the Christian religion in the later centuries of the Roman Empire. But the result was, and is, that the codex book format became identified with Christianity, whereas the scroll became identified with paganism. The victory of the codex, and the victory of Christianity, became one and the same. So any practical arguments about the relative technical merits of the two formats have been almost hopelessly entangled with the religious dimension. The codex 'piggy-backed' to success on Christianity, and its success arose from the need to 'mobilise God' in a particular way using particular texts. Thus the final choice between papyrus and parchment, scroll and codex, was largely a religious i.e. cultural one rather than a technical choice – as had been the retention of the papyrus scroll previously in the 'pagan' period.

Parchment vellum is not, nor was meant to be, nor ever could have been, an everyday writing material such as papyrus was for the upper classes and the imperial civil service of Rome. But during the general contraction of reading and writing in the later empire and its successor states, it was the Christian church which became the main user of books and texts, and the requirements of the church for durable, easy and exact reference to the sacred words and texts confirmed the new format of choice – the vellum codex. Moreover, the church became wealthy enough, and (relatively speaking) secure and stable enough to afford the high price of good-quality vellum. In other words, vellum would only have supplanted papyrus, and the codex the scroll, only in a period when demand for 'books' became limited, specialised, and largely confined to an organisation that by then could afford them – the Christian church. The book became the Book. Christianity was and is a religion of the Book, as is Islam. Roman religion was not. The wonderful Church bibles and other illuminated books produced by the great monastery scriptoria of the later Middle Ages bear witness to the profoundly important place that such high quality vellum books had in the propagation and maintenance of the Christian faith. But it needed an institution like the Church, with its comparative wealth and high patronage, and comparatively small demand for copies, to justify such an elaborate and probably expensive material that would be written upon by highly skilled and unusually dedicated men, the monk-scribes of the monastery scriptoria. Once a precise set of texts or body of literature gained sacred Christian canonical status, then these texts had to be contained within one sacred book – 'the good book' – in a format that could

be repeated with exactitude from edition to edition and place to place. The codex was, one might say, an inspired choice for this purpose.

There can be no final proof of how exactly the Christian adherence to the codex arose. But the purpose and significance of a sacred religious text changed the requirements of that text in terms of its presentation to the reader and user, so that both the formation of the text and of the book itself had to change to meet 'the needs and conditions of different times and places'. This is not to suggest that papyrus or the scroll could have survived indefinitely as the mass medium for texts. Even if religious, political, social and economic factors had not told against it, the advent of mechanical printing, based on the single sheet, would probably have done so sooner or later.

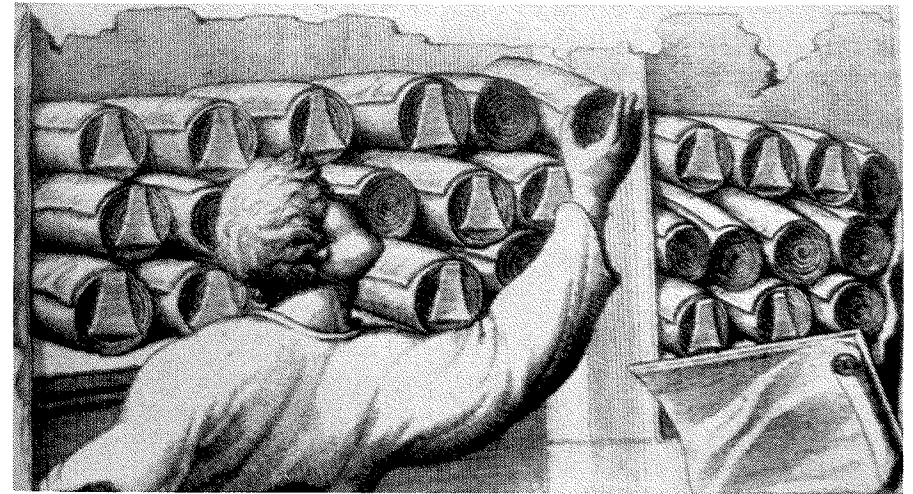
What, however, this discussion does show is that the papyrus scroll was far from being a historical anachronism in its own time. It was capable of further development and more elaborate use than the Romans (as far as we know) actually put it to. If the Romans chose not to pursue those potential developments and uses, it was again by choice, a social and cultural choice. Just because the codex triumphed when and how it did, it should not be assumed that this triumph was inevitable because of the technical shortcomings of papyrus or of the papyrus scroll – or god-given. On the contrary, the scroll was, in its way and in its time, a sophisticated, professional product with its own high aesthetics and cultural values.



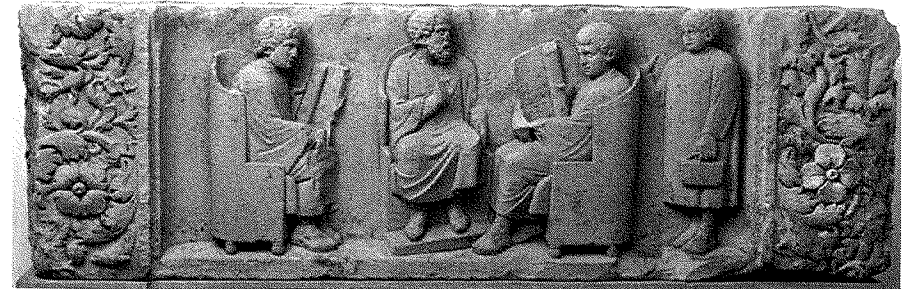
1. Mosaic of the Roman poet Virgil flanked by two Muses, Clio, Muse of History, and Melpomene, Muse of Tragedy. Virgil is holding a Roman 'book', i.e. a papyrus scroll. Note the interesting association of poetry and history (see Chapter 10). Mosaic now in the Bardo Museum, Tunis, but originally from Sousse, and dated to the third century CE.



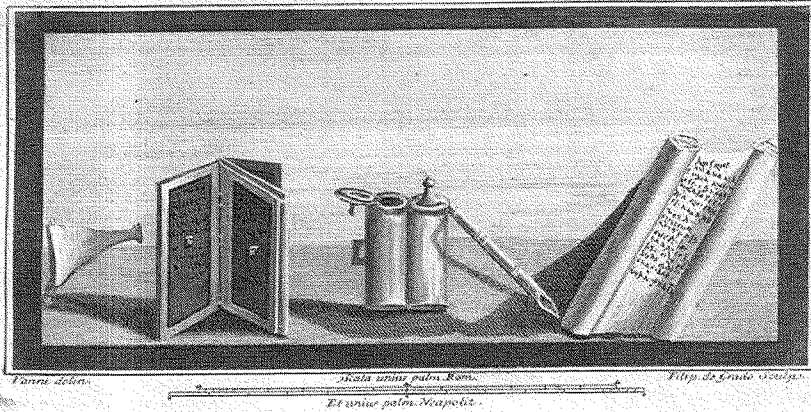
2. Fresco from Pompeii showing a man holding a scroll (book roll) with a title tag and his wife holding a pen and a jointed wooden writing tablet, often referred to as 'Paquius Proculus and his Wife'. Now in Naples Archeological Museum.



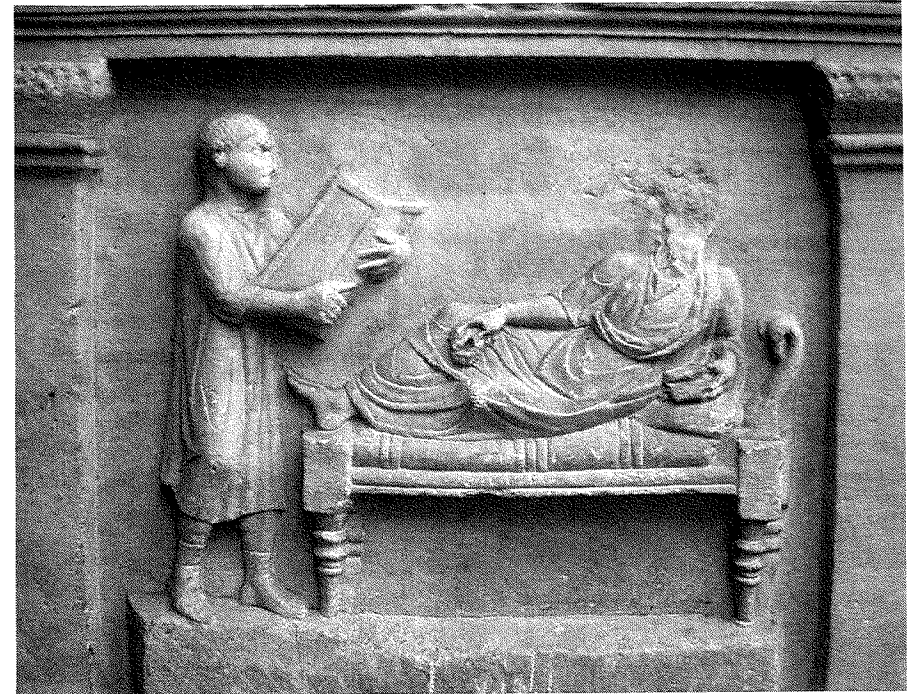
3. Man (perhaps a slave-secretary or *librarius* – see chapter on slavery) reaching for a scroll from a shelf piled three rows high with scrolls, almost all with title tags showing. Engraving of a now lost Roman relief from Neumagen, Germany, said to have been found some time before 1670.



4. Late for school? Roman relief showing (most probably) a bearded teacher lecturing two students, all three seated and the students with opened scrolls, with one student arriving with school bag. In learning to read, 'let the student understand the text', said Quintilian. Now in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Trier.



5 & 6. Two depictions of Roman writing materials. Above (left to right): a title tag for a scroll, a jointed wooden notebook, inkpots, a pen and a scroll. Below: to the left, a wooden notebook with handles to open it, and in the centre, a leather book-box with a lid and straps for storing and carrying scrolls, each with a title tag. The round balls may be inkballs, next to them is a whiteboard for writing on, and on the right, possibly a carrier bag for writing materials. Both are engravings of wall paintings seen at Herculaneum and reproduced in *Delle Antichità de Ercolano*, vol. 2 (Naples, 1759).

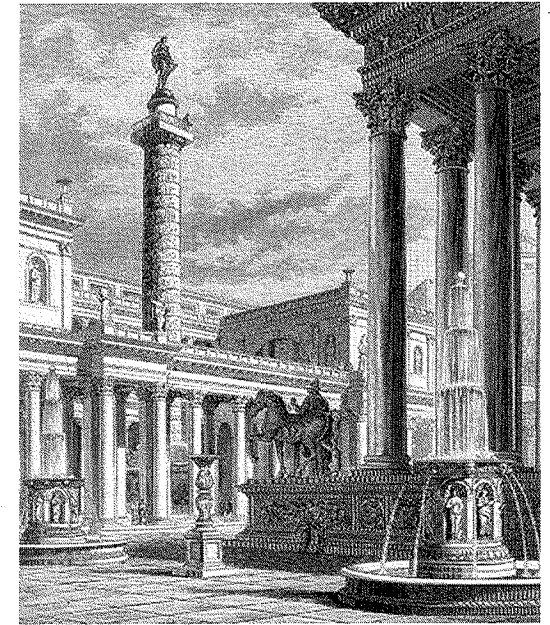


7. Detail of the sarcophagus of the lawyer Valerius Petronianus, dated to around 315-320 CE, showing the lawyer reclining on his couch and (probably) a slave-secretary bringing him his writing tablets. Now in the Milan Archaeological Museum.



8. Strolling players and popular entertainers – street musicians and masked mime actors entertaining the Roman crowd. What did they mime? Mosaic from Pompeii, now in the Naples Archaeological Museum.

9. Imaginative reconstruction of Trajan's Forum and Library at Rome, with Trajan's Column and statue rising between the two halves of the library, with the Basilica Ulpia in the background. From Joseph Kürschner (ed.), *Pierers Konversationslexicon* (1861).



10. A view of the ruins of Hadrian's library in Athens, with the Tsidarakis mosque in the background. An imperial statement?



11. The so-called 'Sappho fresco' from Pompeii showing a young woman sucking her pen and holding a multi-leaved writing tablet apparently bound at the spine, codex-style. Elite or popular culture? Now in the Naples Archaeological Museum.

Don't mess up the aesthetics: marching columns and rivers of letters

There is general agreement that around the early part of the second century CE, perhaps under the emperor Hadrian, an extraordinary change took place in the written presentation of Latin texts. Before that time, spaces between words were at least marked by mid-line dots referred to as 'interpuncts'. This could be seen as a rudimentary punctuation system at work, or at least as a useful aid to readers. But at that time the Romans abandoned spaces between words, and texts became simply an undifferentiated 'river of letters' presented in a style known as *scripta* (or *scriptura*) *continua*. This change has baffled analysts. One tried to defend it as being simply a move to a 'neutral text'.¹ Others have been much more critical, calling it

one of the most astonishing cultural regressions of ancient history ... an amazing and deplorable regression [for] no reason other than an inept desire to imitate even the worst characteristic of Greek books.²

Another points out that students of the history of writing have long been puzzled by this change, and have condemned the dominance of *scriptura continua* in antiquity as a 'retrograde development in human history'.³ The upshot was that:

the whole battery of aids to reading and comprehension which the reader of today takes for granted – the separation of words, systematic provision of accents, and breathings, punctuation and paragraphing, chapter headings, list of contents, footnotes, indexes, bibliographies etc. – simply did not exist in the ancient world.⁴

The aesthetics of the Roman book

Contrary to these opinions, I argue that the Roman habit of *scriptura continua* was far from 'neutral' or 'retrograde', but was a deliberate social and cultural choice. Moreover, the Romans themselves plainly did not see it as a 'retrograde development', never referred to it as such, and did not see it as an 'inept' imitation of Greek practice. Rather, what we perceive as their negative attitude towards punctuation must be seen in the context of their otherwise strict and positive conventions about good presentation

of text on the scroll. Absence of punctuation within the body of the text and the cessation of breaks between words were not therefore signs of a sloppy or careless attitude towards graphical and lexical rules, nor a gesture of contempt towards the status of reading and writing in Roman society. On the contrary, in the Roman context, these choices were part of a consistent and developing view about the aesthetics of best-quality book production.⁵ In short, spaces between words were discarded as superfluous to Roman needs, and punctuation as we today understand it was simply not how the Romans went about 'parsing' the text.

Additionally, the *scriptura continua* style of writing emphasised and consolidated the skilled and elitist status of reading, or rather of being read to, and (paradoxically perhaps) it also consolidated the position of the professional reader or *lector*, often of slave or freedman status, men whom the rich employed to do their reading for them as one sign of their wealth, status and privilege. Thus Roman punctuation, or lack of it, becomes one of the key witnesses to both the aesthetics and the sociology of books and reading in the classical period.

The text on a well-written scroll was presented in a systematic manner, with regularly shaped columns marching neatly along the length of the *volumen*, perhaps leaning slightly to the right at a consistent angle, lines neatly justified right and left, so that the blocks of text formed a consistent graphic image or pattern on the papyrus surface. This was a carefully executed pattern by scribes of high professional skill. It therefore seems plausible, if unprovable, to suggest that those marks that were used on at least some Roman manuscripts, such as the *paragraphus* discussed below, were relegated to the margin, or to an inferior place between lines, because otherwise those marks would have messed up the orderly presentation of the text itself. Perhaps the aesthetic value of the Roman 'book' lay precisely in this orderly presentation of columns 'on the page', rather than in readability in our modern sense, so that anything that compromised these tall regular columns was to be avoided, according to Roman tenets of aesthetic display.

Texts were normally written only on the inner or 'recto' side of the roll, that is, the side where the fibres run left to right along the length of the scroll, with the writing. But there are examples of the other 'verso' side (where the fibres run top to bottom) being used for a run-on of the recto text or for a later, quite different, writing application. Scrolls were used for other than literary applications; perhaps, indeed, the majority of scrolls were put to practical applications such as accounts or inventories – we can't know – and sometimes scrolls had, say, an inventory on one side and a later literary text on the other. The text of a literary or learned work was elegantly written out in neat left- and right-justified columns marching along the scroll in blocks of text that looked good in terms of graphic presentation. But the scroll, and therefore its readers, would have had no sense of the 'page', or the 'spread' of two pages, as units of presentation, as

happens with the contemporary book. The column was the key building block. The aesthetics of the scroll were therefore quite different from those of the codex format.

The effect of blocks of text marching from end to end of the scroll was often further enhanced by the columns being set at a rakish angle, leaning, as it were, slightly forward, instead of being stiffly upright. That this was a deliberate design feature is shown by the scribal dots by which (in the examples examined by Johnson) the scribes marked out the column position before writing.⁶ Also, in a well-executed scroll, the column width seems to have been measured out and marked before writing, perhaps by using a notched stick as a measuring tool. There is a traditional assumption that a tall roll or column was considered more elegant than a short one, but Johnson disputes this, and also disputes any firm relation between presentation and genre i.e. history or philosophy or other type of text.⁷

A Roman-era book was therefore by no means a 'haphazard affair', but had 'a consistent look and feel' that reflected not only scribal professionalism but also what the reader expected to find on and in the scroll. Johnson's examination of the Oxyrhynchus scrolls tends to show not only that there were a considerable number of scribes in the area, but also that individual scribes (where identifiable) had regular habits of presentation, within certain parameters, with 'unexpected uniformity' of column and inter-column spaces, careful choice of the right grade of papyrus paper for the purpose, regularity of top and bottom margins. The scribe aimed at a 'clean, unencumbered text'.⁸

How a scribe wrote, his (or her – female scribes are attested) writing position, may have influenced the column-by-column style of text presentation. There are few if any contemporary reproductions or depictions of Roman copyists. But the position adopted by a copyist was probably not sitting at a desk or table, but sitting on the floor cross-legged, with his tunic stretched between his legs as a sort of substitute for a writing surface, while the left hand held the unwritten scroll and the right hand wrote: either that, or one knee is raised in front of the copyist to provide the sloping surface on which to rest the portion of the scroll to be written on. This picture derives from depictions in Egypt, 'but there is evidence to show that professional scribes of the classical period wrote in the same (to us) most awkward position'.⁹

If there were no tables in Rome's libraries, as is suggested later, then maybe scribes had no tables either. The narrow but precise column of text may therefore have been simply what a scribe in that writing position could actually achieve. This then was the context within which spacing between words was also discarded, as either superfluous or even detrimental to best practice, Roman-style, and in which punctuation was not developed. It messed up the aesthetics.

Punctuation since Rome

It is against this background of Rome's aesthetic ideas about what a book should look like – different from our own but quite specific – that we must return to the question of their lack of punctuation and (in later years) even spaces between words. The development of aids to reading in the form of systematic schemes of punctuation, to include the use of blank spaces, is regarded as one of the great gifts to Western European culture of the post-Roman medieval monastic scribes and scholars, whose ideas and systems were then further consolidated into general use by the development of mechanical mass-production printing methods in the fifteenth and later centuries, methods which demanded well-understood and commonly agreed conventions of presenting text on the page. The main objective was to get the interpretation of the sacred books both right and consistent, so that the approved Christian message was given correctly to the church assembly. Given the imperative need for correct and consistent interpretation of sacred texts that dealt with ultimate matters of faith and personal salvation or damnation, the codex probably lent itself more easily to this type of systematic presentation.

Today, it is very difficult to type an English sentence (or any other European language) into a computer word processor without putting in at least spaces between the words, if not also punctuation. All one's training is to put them in automatically. If you do not, the computer program objects. Unpunctuated and unspaced text looks like a nonsense rhyme, only worse.¹⁰ So punctuation, taken to include the use of commas, semicolons, colons, full stops, paragraphing, as well as blank spaces (between words, at the end of lines that end the paragraph, at the beginning of paragraphs when indented, between paragraphs, between chapters) is today an integral part of the understanding of a text, a key interface between writer and reader, almost itself part of the alphabet, a guide provided by the originators of a text to the users of a text about how best to find one's way around the meaning and balance of the words on the (paper or computer) page – or at least, the meaning as envisaged by the author or editor. This set of conventions is now regarded as an integral part of literacy, even if attention to the precise rules governing the use of particular punctuation marks may vary. Punctuation is one way in which the modern author/writer seeks to control the experience of the reader.

But the Romans had a different view of what should be left to the skill of the reader. If any one factor more than any other explains the need for skilled professional (but slave) readers, as discussed more fully in a later chapter, then this apparently deliberate neglect of aids to reading provides it. The absence of these aids, however necessary they may seem to us, did not apparently worry the Romans one bit – no Roman author ever even hints at such a worry.¹¹ As Saenger points out:

3. Don't mess up the aesthetics

the ancient world did not possess the desire, characteristic of the modern age, to make reading easier and swifter because the advantages that modern readers perceive as accruing from ease of reading were seldom viewed as advantages by the ancients.¹²

What happened before the 'retrograde' step?

What exactly the Romans did before the dropping of breaks between words at around the time of the emperor Hadrian is a matter of some controversy. It is an argument complicated by the difficulty, at least until recently, of getting direct access to the few original manuscripts that have survived from classical Roman times, and to the original inscriptions of the classical period on the actual stone or other material on which the Latin words and letters were carved – as opposed, that is, to the versions of these texts offered by scholarly editors who have, in many cases, already imposed some degree of modern presentation upon the original text.

There is little dispute that the Greek writing style of the time, and well before it, was already in the form of the simple 'river of letters'. If indeed the Romans 'regressed', the Greeks had done so long before them, and Rome was simply catching up. Nor was the 'regression' just the result of ignorance of alternative styles of text presentation. As Saenger points out:

the survival of numerous bilingual fragments written on papyrus suggests that the Romans, Greeks and Jews in late antiquity were aware of each other's differing graphic traditions regarding word separation.¹³

What is remarkable, given the overwhelming influence of Greek culture upon Roman, is not that the Romans switched to the Greek style of text presentation, but that they took so long to do so. Evidence is plentiful that the Romans retained word separation long after the Greeks abandoned it. Good examples are graffiti found on the walls of Pompeii and therefore dating to 79 CE or just before,¹⁴ where one finds so-called election slogans with interpuncts and (to take just one further example) the famous couplet:¹⁵

*admiror te paries non cecidisse
quitot scriptorum taedia sustineas*

I admire you, wall, for not falling down when you have to carry so much boring writing

The fact that the interpuncts do not occur everywhere where we might expect to see them, for example between *admiror* and *te*, may be partly the result of its being a quickly written graffito by a possibly less than fully literate person – but partly perhaps because even at that time the Romans did not necessarily write or pronounce word divisions in all the places where modern English or other modern European usage might indicate. It

is thought, for example, that certain combinations of noun and preposition and certain other word combinations were treated as a single unit of text or speech, rather as is done in modern Russian and German in certain defined grammatical situations.¹⁶

In addition to the plentiful examples of breaks between words found on inscriptions carved on stone, which otherwise might just indicate conventions in stone carving, further evidence is provided by the papyrus fragment of the elegiacs written by Cornelius Gallus¹⁷ and found in Egypt, probably dating to his lifetime when he was governor of Egypt. This fragment (if genuine) affords a glimpse of what 'best practice' may have been like at that time in laying out a poem on the papyrus page.¹⁸ Its neat and regular presentation is a tribute to the scribal art of the time. If this skill was evident in Egypt, it seems not unreasonable to suppose that the same basic craft standards would have applied to trained professional scribes (slave or free) everywhere. If the Roman book was, in its best examples, a cultural icon, then these craft standards demanded more than just knowing how to put stylus to papyrus, but also how to apply aesthetic and artistic criteria to enhance presentation.

The fragment uses spacing and indentation of the pentameters, and the interpunct is systematically used, as in the first complete full line, line 2.

Fata mihi Caesar tum erunt mea dulcia quom tu
Caesar, fate was kind to me when you ...

This systematic use of word division by means of the interpunct is almost certainly what Seneca meant when he wrote¹⁹

nos etiam cum scribimus interpungere assuevimus
we are used to putting in interpuncts when we write.

Some have taken this to refer to punctuation generally, but it makes better sense if taken as referring simply to word division.²⁰ But if, as Seneca says, they were in his day quite used to separating words, it follows that the stylistic decision to abandon division between words must have been taken quite consciously.

The Oliver/Wingo argument

There are however those who argue that, before the critical Hadrianic date, the Romans also had, in addition to simple word division, an elaborate formal system of punctuation, that is, a set of marks used within and around the text to perform much the same functions as punctuation does today, but using different marks. Beginning from Suetonius' remark that systematic editing of literary texts began at Rome in 169 BCE under the influence of Crates Mallotes,²¹ Oliver then concludes, on the basis of three

3. Don't mess up the aesthetics

early 'meagre and mutilated' fragments of Latin books dating to the time of Augustus or the first century BCE,²² that:

these by the unanimity of their testimony suffice to show that Latin literary texts were written with careful and elaborate punctuation.²³

He then details this supposed punctuation. This detail was further elaborated by E. Otha Wingo,²⁴ whose book identifies a set of 21 different marks (if a blank space is included) by which, in his view, the Romans of the classical era 'punctuated' their texts. Wingo's main concern seems to be to establish that in the 'golden age' of Roman literature, the likes of Virgil, Horace and Livy, in order to create their literary masterpieces, did use the full armoury of punctuation. Otherwise (it is implied but not stated), how could they have done it? Wingo argues that during the great age of Latin literature, formal Latin, in contrast to contemporary Greek, was not only separated into words by the use of interpuncts, but was also divided into sentences and clauses by special punctuation signs. He therefore concludes that:

we are entitled to assume that our texts of such authors as Cicero, Sallust, and Livy, Lucretius, Virgil and Ovid were ultimately derived from copies that were punctuated for sense.²⁵

Wingo bases his positive view about Roman punctuation upon a detailed but second-hand examination of Augustus' *Res Gestae*, the emperor's own formal testimony to his period of rule as inscribed on stone in partial fragments found in three places in modern Turkey, Ankara, Antioch and Apollonia, in Latin and in Greek. But there are forceful arguments against Wingo's proposition. One is that his elaborate so-called punctuation system does not turn up anywhere other than in the *Res Gestae*, nor is it referred to by any Roman writer. For example, Aulus Gellius, despite his great antiquarian concern to establish what Virgil and other authors of that era actually wrote in their original texts, never once talks about punctuation.²⁶ Secondly, his supposed punctuation system is internally very complex, and even Wingo has to admit that there are apparently three or even six different values for any given mark. It is hard to believe that this was a recognised system of punctuation at work. Thirdly, Johnson, in his examination of the Oxyrhynchus fragments, found no similar system of marks.²⁷ A recent edition of the *Res Gestae* published in France does not discuss punctuation at all, although it does point out, interestingly, that the Greek version has no spaces between words whereas the Latin version does.²⁸ It must be assumed therefore that 'golden age' Latin writers, listeners and readers found nothing at all strange in the writing and understanding of texts written down with word breaks but with little or nothing else. For Virgil and his famous contem-

poraries it must have been the normal thing, not calling for comment or action.

We are therefore left with a general picture of absence of punctuation, and abandonment at a certain time of even inter-word spacing and dots. The Roman papyri reproduced by Cugusi in his study of Latin letter-writing (*epistolae*) corroborate this picture.²⁹ Five letters datable to the period between Augustus and 84 CE clearly use inter-word spaces and dots.³⁰ Then it appears to get more erratic: letters written between about 100 CE and the mid-second century seem to have spaces and dots in some cases and not in others, or to be internally inconsistent.³¹ Thereafter, the letters no longer have these attributes at all.³² As another illustrative example, a fragment of Cicero's famous speech against Verres, said to be 'the doyen of Latin papyri found in Egypt' and dated to 20 BCE, uses systematic interpuncts (and so word spacing).³³ But in the fragment of the epitome of Livy held in the British Library, and datable to the third or fourth century CE, the mid-line dot is placed after abbreviations – but not otherwise used.³⁴ The basic picture is, by these limited samples, confirmed.

The use of the *paragraphus*, the *diplê*, dots and *coronis*

This does not however entirely dispose of the question of those additional marks which were placed on scrolls by scribes, by teachers, by grammarians or by readers. When modern commentators refer to 'Roman punctuation', it is to these marks that they refer, and in particular to the *paragraphus*. The *paragraphus* was a short horizontal mark put into the margin or in between two lines of text at the far left end, to denote some shift of subject or a change of speaker, for example in drama.³⁵ Such a mark is found frequently, but far from universally, and can have several different significations. It is presumed that, in those manuscripts where it is found, it is the work of the scribe who wrote out the text. But it can hardly have been of much use in the actual deciphering of the text, since it did not accurately mark divisions between sentences or within them, or indicate the relationship between different parts of the text.

In addition, there may be dots at various points, but these may often be the work of the reader rather than the scribe, and there is evidence that when scribes copied a work, they did not copy all the dots they found on it, perhaps for that very reason.³⁶ A marginal dot was sometimes added by scribes to mark every tenth line i.e. was a scribal rather than a reader aid.³⁷ Another mark, the *diplê*, like a right-angled bracket, when put into the margin apparently to indicate a noteworthy line, is almost certainly a reader's addition to aid his or her understanding or reading, and so not to be labelled 'punctuation'. The *coronis* (used in the *Res Gestae*) took various graphic forms, but was a flourish of the pen or chisel to indicate the end of a chapter, or its equivalent.

The *paragraphus*, and perhaps some of the other marks, may then be regarded as a form of proto-punctuation, but not punctuation in the full and proper sense. Nevertheless, the *idea* of using marks to supplement the letters was clearly there. What is surely significant for this investigation is that the Romans apparently saw no need to elaborate and systematise such marks in or by the text so as to become 'punctuation' in the modern sense, and did not do so. So the use of the *paragraphus* and the dots merely accentuates the lack of proper punctuation in Roman texts. They demonstrate that the Romans were perfectly familiar with the basic idea of adding marks to the text for some purpose or another (even if they had not been aware of punctuation used in other, neighbouring languages), but simply had no motive for developing that idea, maybe even a cultural prejudice against it.

Let them understand

How then did Roman readers (whoever they were) find their way round or through a text? Quintilian is at pains to stress that the fundamental problem for a student in grasping how to perform reading or recitation and interpretation of poetry is not so much learning how to decipher the text, but learning to understand it – *intellegat* ('let him understand') – and from that understanding would come the correct phrasing when reading.³⁸ Saenger suggests that:

the onerous tasks of keeping the eyes ahead of the voice while accurately reading unseparated script, so familiar to the ancient Greeks and Romans, can be described as a kind of elaborate search pattern.³⁹

Modern languages, or at least modern European languages, rely heavily upon word order to create meaning and sense, as did medieval Latin. But classical Latin, particularly but not only poetry, had no such premium on word order, and that is why reading it was 'a kind of elaborate search pattern'. Classical Latin relied on complex grammar and inflexion of nouns, verbs and adjectives to indicate the connections between words and so the meaning and sense. Words were not necessarily – and especially not in poetry – grouped by grammatical affinity. Word order was governed more by the sound of the words when strung together to create the fine-sounding prose periods and poetic verses in which the trained ear of the educated Roman took such delight – a delight in *hearing*. Did it *sound* right? The sound of books is something to which we shall return.

This complex grammatical structure, not reliant on word order, meant that the full meaning of a portion of text might not become clear until some time after a particular word had passed in front of the reader's eye – i.e. there was a period of unresolved ambiguity that persists until possibly the end of the thought sequence had been reached. Saenger⁴⁰ argues that:

in the periodic sentences of antiquity, which were often logically imperfect in their syntax, long portions of text had to be read and retained in memory without being fully understood before ambiguity in construction could be resolved and meaning rendered apparent ... in ancient Latin, permutations of sequence only rarely had an impact on sense, but they were fundamental elements of mellifluous style.

Hence the great reliance in Roman times on the *praelectio*, a private pre-reading of a text so as to grasp its sense and syllables, its word and period divisions, much used in the school classroom and before any public reading took place.⁴¹ It may also be that the semi-public readings (*recitationes*) given by authors,⁴² or by others during the author's lifetime, such as the actors who recited passages of Virgil in the theatre, perhaps with him present in the audience,⁴³ set up an aural memory of the intended phrasing of the text among contemporaries that could have lasted into the next generation or two, and could have been noted down by contemporary teachers and grammarians in Rome. After that, perhaps a reader could rely on his understanding of the text and of what were still the current language and language forms and rhythms of the day.

Different times, different texts

What this discussion of word division, punctuation, word order, and the formatting of text on the book-roll clearly brings out is that reading, even for that minority that could do it, was in Roman times a profoundly different skill compared to reading today, with different parameters and problems: both much more difficult, and a fundamentally different experience. It is not enough to dismiss the Roman reference for *scriptura continua* as simply 'cultural snobbery'⁴⁴ – it was that, but it was also an active decision that they positively did not need the spaces between words, given who did the reading, and where and how, and what a prestige artefact or cultural icon like a 'book' should look like. Attitudes to punctuation, the river of letters, word order, the scroll rather than the codex, papyrus rather than parchment, the definition of scribal skill – all these form one unified picture. The aesthetics of the Roman book and attitudes to how text should be presented become a sign of, and a graphic metaphor for, the style of hierarchical social organisation dominant over the Roman period, based on status markers at the top and skilled slaves at the bottom rung of the class system. If reading was difficult, almost esoteric, the Romans who mattered liked it that way.

Did the medium shape the message? Deciphering the author's intent

One persistent line of enquiry has sought to show that the form and size of the Roman scroll somehow influenced or governed the content, the literary or other work written on it. This needs to be considered, but only briefly, since it is a literary cul-de-sac. Dilke wrote:

long works were invariably divided into books, which to a large extent were related to the length of the rolls.¹

Theodor Birt in his most influential book² compiled huge tables of the relative and absolute lengths of most of Greek and Latin literature in order to classify it by bulk (number of lines, words), implying that this was a significant fact about each work. The most recent discussion that I have found that tests the same hypothesis is a paper published in 1980³ – a century after Birt's book appeared. Birt had concluded that:

for different literary genres it was customary or obligatory to have different book formats or sizes [and that] individual books or scrolls of scholarly works in prose were thus consistently kept in larger formats, those of poetic works were consistently in smaller ones.⁴

The evidence of Isidore

Apart from his own massive tables, Birt cited as his evidence a statement by Isidore of Seville, writing in the early part of the seventh century CE (i.e. five or more centuries after our period of investigation) to the effect that 'certain categories of books were made (*conficiebantur*) in fixed sizes (*moduli*). Poems and epistles were in a smaller format (*forma*), but histories were written (*scribebantur*) in a larger size'.⁵ Isidore appears to use *forma* and *modulus* interchangeably, and how you translate these Latin words depends largely on what you suppose he meant. But he does not say anything about the 'size' and 'format' of the works being connected to the size or capacity of the scroll. His comment could as easily be a comment on authorial conventions. His Latin word *conficiebantur* could as easily mean 'put together' in the manner of an author putting together a work, as opposed to 'made' in the physical sense of a scroll being made, and this interpretation is

supported by his use of *scribebantur* ('books ... were written'). Birt, in other words, leans too heavily on a single (and very late) quotation that may or (more likely) may not mean what he supposed.

Capacity of the scroll

In the 1950s there was another, more thoughtful attempt to show that at least the average size of Roman scrolls may have held some significance for the works written on them. Kenyon⁶ compared the sizes of many of those specimens of scrolls that have survived, and while fully admitting that wide variation does exist, he nevertheless concluded that a roll of 30-35 feet in length (he was writing pre-metric) was normal, with a median range of 25-45 lines to a column, a median column width of 2-4 inches including the margin between columns, and a median letter count of 18-25 per line. On this basis, Kenyon went on to remark that:

a roll of about 32-35 feet would hold, in a medium-sized hand, one of the longer books of the New Testament (Matthew, Luke, or Acts) or a book of Thucydides.⁷

and noted that Thucydides Book 2 is almost the same length as Matthew, that is, 18,000 words. Kenyon was therefore implying some link between form and content, scroll and text. In similar vein, Roberts and Skeat remarked that the 10,000-line poem by Sufferus, mentioned by Catullus⁸, 'would have filled 3 papyrus rolls of normal size'.⁹

The fatal flaws

Wisely, these authors left it at that. For there are two main objections to this line of enquiry, either of them fatal. The first objection is that the scroll itself, whatever its averages, could vary greatly both in width and in length (see Kenyon's own valuable calculations), thus creating an immensely wide variation in the total surface area available for writing on. The widest known scroll is four times the width of the narrowest known. The size of the letters and the columns could also vary. Then again, as we have seen, if a scroll was still too short to take the text you wanted to put on it, you could just glue another sheet or sheets of papyrus onto the end of it – after all, the scroll was a set of sheets stuck together in the first place, so the process could go on ad infinitum, or almost. Or of course you could chop bits off the end of the scroll if it was too long. So there was great variability in the possible size and capacity of the text vehicle, and the Roman habit of writing (by hand, of course) in a 'river of letters', without punctuation or (from about the time of Hadrian) gaps between words, made the variability from one scroll to another, or between one scribe and another, even more marked, even for the same work. Modern concepts like

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word counts look anachronistic, and the vehicle looks far too variable to govern its contents.

Whose structuring?

The second objection is that we have only scattered evidence about how Roman authors themselves sought to structure their work – about their intended 'architecture' of it. Much of the apparent structuring that we see in modern editions of Roman books is or may be the work of later Roman grammarians and/or Renaissance or modern editors. In many cases we cannot be sure what the author's original intentions were, while in other cases we do have some degree of certainty, perhaps a high degree, from internal evidence.

Take the case of Tacitus. The section or paragraph numbering, and the sub-section numbering within those units of text that we see in modern editions are no older than the seventeenth century.¹⁰ It seems unlikely that the titles *Annals* and *Histories* go back to Tacitus, or indeed to antiquity. They were almost certainly grafted on by medieval editors.¹¹ Jerome refers¹² to the thirty books of Tacitus' lives of the Caesars down to Domitian, and this is generally assumed to mean that he had, or knew about, a consolidated edition of Tacitus in which what we know as the *Histories* and the *Annals* were put together and numbered sequentially from 1 to 30 – presumably 12 for what we know as the *Histories* and 18 for the *Annals*, unless you believe, as some do, that the division was 14+16. This numbering from 1 to 30 also turns up in one of the early medieval manuscripts of Tacitus.¹³ At least it shows that the division of Tacitus into 30 books (not all of which have survived) does probably go back to antiquity, and not to some medieval scribe. One scholar indeed thinks¹⁴ that this consolidated edition goes back to the third century, perhaps indeed to the edition that the emperor Tacitus,¹⁵ who claimed a bloodline going back to the historian, is said to have commissioned to save his forebear from oblivion. But this is speculative and does not prove (or disprove) that Tacitus himself envisaged his work in the form of the 'books' that we now have.

The example of Tacitus shows how important it is not to be mesmerised by the appearance of Latin texts in today's editions. On the other hand, division into books – but Roman-style 'books'¹⁶ – does certainly go back to antiquity, at least in some cases. Suetonius tells us¹⁷ that C. Octavius Lampadio in the second century BCE edited the *Bellum Punicum* of Naevius into seven books,¹⁸ a task that Q. Varguntius later performed for the *Annals* of Ennius. So the idea of division into books was quite familiar, although in these two cases it was the work of a later editor or grammarian, not the author.

Famously, Virgil did not live to finish the *Aeneid* (at least, not to his satisfaction) and wanted it burnt. But the poem was prepared for 'publication' by two 'editors' or 'literary executors' appointed by Augustus. So we

cannot be absolutely sure whether the exact division into 12 books as we now have them was the work of Virgil, his 'editors', or subsequent grammarian/editor/scribes, although internal evidence – and the arithmetical analogy with the conventional division of Homer's two epics into 24 books – suggests strongly that the present structure is pretty much what Virgil wanted.¹⁹ Martial is one of the few who make explicit and systematic reference to the numbers and numbering of his 'books' within his text, thus making it virtually certain that Martial himself planned the issue of his books in their present form, probably by making selections or collections from the epigrams and poems already read out and/or written and circulated by him singly or as small *libelli*. Martial frequently makes reference to his book numbers (e.g. in Book 6 he twice refers to *sextus libellus* – 'my sixth book').²⁰ So we can be pretty sure that Martial's books, as they have come down to us, are what the author intended, and their regularity in size may be seen as supporting that.²¹

Among other poets, Catullus wrote (as far as we know) 2,290 lines of verse, of which 848 lines appear in what is now known as his first book. It is thought that Catullus himself may have been responsible for the 'edition' of his poems that has come down to us, if only because 'the extensive cross-references suggest that they were edited by himself'²² and Catullus does refer to his first book as *novum libellum* – 'a new book'. Horace, Propertius, Ovid and Statius are other poets sometimes considered to have issued editions of their poems compiled by themselves which have then come down to us via the manuscript tradition.²³ Among prose authors, Appian specifically tells us that Book 2 of his *Civil Wars* is his second book.²⁴ So the evidence is mixed. In some cases, we may detect at least an echo, even a strong echo, of the author's original intentions in the structuring of his work(s). In others, we just don't know – or know that today's apparent structuring is the work of later, possibly Roman, possibly medieval, or even early modern editors. This is shaky ground upon which to hypothesise some general influence of the medium, the scroll, upon the message, or some definable interaction between the two.

Lost meanings?

There remains a third possibility that further complicates the issue of author's intent. This is that some modern editions or 'rearrangements' of classical works, however well-meaning, may serve to disguise, even obliterate, the compositional structure and author's intentions of the original. Mary Beard points out²⁵ that the major modern editions of Cicero's letters are based upon re-ordering them in chronological order, as compared to the original manuscripts in which they are preserved. If they are to be regarded mainly as historical documents, to be mined as evidence for the events of their time, then there may be a purpose to that re-ordering. But, Beard argues, this 'wholesale dismantling' may also destroy the literary

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purposes of these letter collections in the form first presented to us. She argues that we may have lost as much as we have gained by this reordering of Cicero's letters, and investigates what we might gain by going back to reading the letters as presented. This is particularly important because:

there is clear evidence to suggest that [the collections of Cicero's *Letters to Atticus* and *To Friends*], more or less as they are preserved in the manuscripts, were assembled, 'published' and became part of the literary tradition of Rome some time before the end of the first century AD; clear evidence, in other words, that the books whose dismemberment we have witnessed were the product of a Roman editor, or editors, working within a century or so, at most, of Cicero's death.²⁷

In other words, the manuscripts, if respected, take us back tantalisingly close to the author himself, especially if, as some suppose, the editor in question may have been Cicero's ex-slave freedman and literary secretary, Tiro, or Atticus, to whom many of the letters were sent. (For Tiro, see also Appendix A, where the challenge to Tiro's fame as the inventor of Roman shorthand is discussed and rejected.) Tiro is also the 'other person' involved in one particular set of Cicero's letters, the group of 27 letters known as Book 16 of the *Letters to Friends*. Beard points out that this set has been subject to a double distortion, so that 'the original book is practically invisible'. What is now referred to as 'the traditional order' (to contrast with the recent chronological re-ordering) was in fact established, not in antiquity at all, but in about 1566 by Lambinus in Paris, and was itself a reordering carried out by Lambinus in the belief that there had once been a correct order that had been disrupted. So, says Beard:

the result is that even the traditional numbers do not match the order of the letters in the manuscripts.²⁸

Beard suggests therefore that modern editions present Cicero's letters in a manner that was never intended, and that going back to the original manuscript presentation of the letters to Tiro, and reading them as a crafted unity conceived very near to the time of the author, shows them to be a powerful testimony to the nature of slavery in Rome, and invites the reader to experience them as a metaphor for, and commentary on, the slide of the Roman Republic towards the political 'slavery' of imperial one-man rule. One does not have to accept or reject Beard's literary and political interpretation to grasp the important point of methodology in considering the shape or shaping of Latin texts.

Thus the evidence on the original question – did the medium shape the message? – dictates extreme caution, not least because a typical Roman author's most immediate preoccupation was, I shall suggest, not with a written text as such, but with an oral presentation of his new work from a private stage and in certain cases with potential theatrical presentation

on the public stage. That Roman authors often or usually shaped their issued works with creative intentions and with the user/reader in mind, is clear and natural enough, even if we can no longer discern in all cases what those intentions were, or whose intentions we are witnessing. That is not the issue here. What a Roman author may have had in mind as he dictated his words to his slave-secretary is not to be confused with the creative processes of a modern author structuring his work in an entirely different 'publishing' environment – or with the alleged holding capacity of the scroll.

Deconstructing the Roman book trade

Slavery as the enabling infrastructure of Roman literature

There are many figures that appear on the Roman literary landscape in addition to those we might refer to as the author, writer or reader – functionaries whose distinctive roles merited separate job-titles such as *librarius*, *notarius*, *amanuensis*, *anagnostes*, *bibliopola*, *glutinator* and *exceptor*. Who were all these people? Even with the Latin equivalents of author, writer and reader – words like *scriptor* and *lector* – we have to look closely at who was doing what. To do this, we need to look carefully at the Latin terminology, at what the Romans actually say, to see what they and their language can tell us about what ‘publishing’ really entailed at Rome, about how books were created, and by whom. What is striking is the degree of ‘indicative ambiguity’ that we find in the terminology they used.

Authors, writers and readers

The Latin language does not contain a noun that normally and unambiguously denotes an ‘author’ in the way that this English word does. The obvious Latin equivalent *auctor* can indeed mean ‘author’ in the modern sense,¹ but more often it means an ‘authority’ on some subject or fact,² an expert, or someone who authorises something to be done. *Scriba* as meaning an author is rare,³ and more usually indicates one who has charge of public records or accounts, a public or official scribe, who may have been a public slave or may have held a more elevated status. They may, for example, have been officials attached to a Roman magistrate or other officeholder. Thus one inscription⁴ – presumably having an inscription implied some higher status – refers to someone who was a *scriba ab epistolis Graecis* (roughly, clerk in charge of Greek-language communications) for a religious affairs office in Rome. Confusingly, such persons may also be called *scriba librarius*. Perhaps being an ‘author’ was not, for the Romans, so clear-cut or separate a function as to merit a standard word for it.

Words for writer and reader are not clear-cut in meaning either. *Scriptor* also has an interesting ‘indicative ambiguity’ about its meaning. *Scriptor* can certainly mean an author or writer in the modern sense of the person who composes a work.⁵ But it also often means simply one who writes things down, a scribe or copyist.⁶ To emphasise this latter meaning, Horace refers to the *librarius scriptor* – the ‘book writer’.⁷ But it is the

duality of the word that is interesting. *Scriptor* straddles both the manual and the intellectual meanings of the English 'writer' – but English has the more specific term 'author' for the person who intellectually composes, which Latin does not.

The same 'indicative ambiguity' appears in relation to the *lector*. *Lector* can mean simply 'reader' in today's sense.⁸ Sometimes there is a clear implication of reading aloud. Quintilian refers to a schoolboy told to be the *lector* to read aloud to the rest of the class.⁹ But the word could also denote a professional reader, someone who is employed to read aloud to others.¹⁰ The *lector* could, in this latter sense, be the same person as the *scriptor* – Cicero refers to one Diphilus as the *scriptor et lector* of Crassus.¹¹ Yet one may assume that Crassus was quite capable of being a *scriptor* and a *lector* himself – but in the other meaning of those two terms.

In addition to his large staff of *librarii*,¹² Cicero's wealthy friend Atticus also had a different group of men in his household, the *anagnôstae*,¹³ his professional readers. *Anagnôstês* was a Greek word imported into Latin usage as an equivalent to *lector* but to denote more clearly the second meaning of *lector* as a professional reader-aloud. This is itself, I suggest, an interesting verbal importation, perhaps indicating some anxiety about the ambiguity of the Latin term. Thus in the case of Atticus the *librarii* presumably did the writing and copying which Atticus performed as a service to his friends (but not as a business), while the *anagnôstae* did the reading aloud. For people with poor or failing eyesight, the *lector* was also the Roman equivalent of a pair of spectacles or reading glasses.¹⁴ The *lector* could also be in effect an entertainer. Pliny refers to people leaving a dinner party when a *lector* appeared to read to the guests.¹⁵ Hendrickson points out that the word *auditor* in Latin, 'listener' or 'hearer', also often means in effect 'the reader', with again an indicative ambiguity as to whether the reader hears his own voice when he is reading aloud to himself or whether it is the voice of another reading to him.¹⁶

Secretaries

Of these important literary 'dramatis personae' the most commonly referred to is the *librarius*. This was a staff member who could deal with all aspects of handling books and textual composition (hence the job title, from the Latin *liber*, a book) and of writing and reading generally, so the term can be inherently confusing. Where there was not a specialist *scriptor* or *lector* or *notarius* (see below), the *librarius* seems to have straddled all or any of these skills – and more. A term that meant (to Cicero, for example) a person who could write and read, and was a sort of literary and correspondence secretary, also came to signify someone who worked in a library and later a bookseller in the sense of a place where (as we have seen) you could get a book copied or buy a scroll with the text of a given author already copied onto it. Cicero at one point asks his secretary Tiro¹⁷

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to send him urgently a *librarius*, preferably a Greek one, since he is wasting so much time copying out his notes – *in scribendis hypomnematis*. This was presumably a man with native skills in writing Greek, though it may just be a preference by Cicero for a Greek 'secretary'. This basic sense of *librarius* as a secretary with literate skills occurs elsewhere in Cicero,¹⁸ and in Livy.¹⁹

Librarius also came to be used in a wide variety of contexts other than the retinue of rich households like that of Atticus. An inscription²⁰ tells us of someone who held the post of [*librarius*] *ab epistolis Latinis* in the imperial household, so showing how the post of *librarius* became an important one around the imperial court or in the imperial civil service. Suetonius says that already in the time of Claudius the emperor had in his retinue [*librarii*] *ab epistulis, a studiis, a rationibus* i.e. for correspondence, for making extracts from books for his master's literary efforts, and for accounts.²¹ There was also the military post of *librarius legionis*, which presumably refers to the man who writes letters for the officers (and others?) perhaps from dictation, as in the many letters found at Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall, written on thin slivers of folding wood and often in the same hand, apart from the signature and salutation which appear to have been added by the sender to the dictated text.²² The skill range of the *librarius* could possibly also cover the job of the *glutinator* whose job it was to glue together the papyrus sheets that went to make up the bookroll.

Librarius may also be contrasted with the *notarius*, who was something akin to a shorthand note-taker or speedwriter who took down dictation from his owner and made sense of it by later writing it out in full. For example, Pliny tells us that his uncle the elder Pliny, in addition to a *lector* to read to him, had a *notarius* constantly at his side with notebooks – *pugillares* – to take down ideas and excerpts for the many books he owned, so that when he died he left 160 such notebooks crammed with tiny writing on both sides of the 'paper'. Pliny himself refers to his own *notarius* (*notarium voco et ... quae formulaverim, dicto* – 'I call my *notarius* and dictate what I have composed') and says he took his *pugillares* with him even when out hunting. Martial has an epigram written to/about a *notarius* and elsewhere refers to a *notarius velox*, a 'swift notetaker', presumed to be a particularly skilful shorthand writer or other sort of speedwriter.²³ The *notarius* also took down proceedings of the law courts. The *exceptor* appears to have had much the same imperial function as the *notarius*. Quintilian refers to *notarii* who were sloppy in taking his words down (*excipientium*) in the hope of a quick profit.²⁴ It is to be noted that the *notarius* is by definition someone to whom one *dictates* material.²⁵ Martial refers to a pretentious man surrounded by a crowd of *notarii* with their notebooks outstretched.²⁶ Much later – and as an illustration of the change in usage over time – the *notarius* also became a high official in the imperial court, much as, or more so than, other members of the imperial

secretariat. Constantine, for example, used people of this title in the imperial chancellery, and sent them on important missions. In addition, there was the general term *amanuensis*, almost literally an extension of the hands of the person he worked for, a general-purpose term that seems to have covered almost all these secretarial duties.²⁷

Slaves as infrastructure

So who exactly were all these people with this great range of job titles? This analysis of the personnel that the Romans used in and around their composition and 'publishing' of books is most revealing about the role played by slaves and slavery.²⁸ As we have seen, on the one hand, the 'writer' at Rome could either be what we call the author of the literary work himself, or the secretary who physically wrote out the text for his master/patron. On the other hand, the 'reader' could be either the person perusing the text for private purposes; or a professional reader who perused the text and read it out to, or for, other people. Here we come to what is perhaps the most important of the 'indicative ambiguities' of Roman publishing terminology. All these people whose job titles we have been discussing were slaves, or sometimes freed slaves still in the household.²⁹

Such persons, slaves or freedmen, were on the staff of those men who were able to afford them. These literate slaves or ex-slaves were perhaps among the fortunate few compared to the generally brutal regime suffered by Roman slaves. Nevertheless, Romans of the upper classes apparently took for granted the presence of these human aides to writing and reading. Often, the presence of a slave/freedman figure is not mentioned, but has to be inferred. So common were they in these grand households that their presence is often unacknowledged, assumed, taken for granted. Yet these slaves were a key component of literary life at Rome, perhaps a defining instrument (an *instrumentum vocale* – a tool with a voice) of how literary life was carried on. Literate slaves were the indispensable enabling infrastructure of Roman literary life, as of written exchanges of all kinds.³⁰

Naming some names

Some of the names of these slave-secretaries have come down to us, though of course the vast majority have not. Cicero had his main secretary Tiro and a reader called Sositheus³¹ and another called Dionysius who ran away with some of Cicero's books.³² He also had a man called Tyrannio who sorted his books.³³ His friend Atticus had two men (among many others) called Dionysius (one may assume, not the same one) and Menophilus. Crassus had his Diphilus. Such men are referred to, by Nepos among others,³⁴ as Atticus' *pueri* (boys), much as white settlers in Africa used to refer to their African servants as 'boy' – whatever their age. M. Marius, a friend of Cicero, had his *lector* Protogenes.³⁵ The younger Pliny had a *lector*

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called Encolpius,³⁶ and the emperor Marcus Aurelius had a *lector* called Niger.³⁷ Virgil had an ex-slave called Eros who was, says Suetonius,³⁸ his *librarius et libertus*, his secretary/copyist and his freedman. All or most have Greek names, suggesting that they either came from the eastern half of the empire, or had their ethnic origin there – or perhaps it was the fashion to call a literate slave by a Greek name, just to make clear his status and skill.

Of these men, Cicero's Tiro is by far the most famous, thanks largely to the letters sent to Tiro by Cicero or by Cicero's brother Quintus that have survived as part of Cicero's voluminous correspondence – the 27 letters that form Book 16 of Cicero's *Letters to Friends*. Tiro was the likely initiator of Roman shorthand (see Appendix A). Tiro began as a slave, and was later freed by Cicero. He outlived Cicero, and may himself have been Cicero's literary executor, or editor of Cicero's collections of letters.³⁹ Cicero's letters to Tiro show great concern for Tiro's health, in tones which suggest a very warm relationship between the two men. There has been much speculation about the exact nature of this relationship, but little doubt that it was

a relationship of love and care ... forged across the boundaries of social status. [But] the paradox is that Cicero and his family love their (ex-) slave in the language of slavery itself (or its parodies).⁴⁰

Particularly striking is the use, even if in jest, by Quintus of the word 'thrash' in relation to Tiro. In what is labelled as Letter 26, Quintus says he has 'thrashed' Tiro, at least in his mind, for not sending him a letter. Thrashing with a whip was the most forcible symbol of a Roman master's absolute power over his slave. The correspondence generally is full of terms that characterise the slave/freedman's relation to his (ex-)master – words like *officium* (duty) and *fides* (faithfulness).⁴¹

Slaves as process

Such men as Tiro and the others were perhaps the true readers and writers of the Roman world, and were slaves by status – those who wrote down the dictation of the great and not-so-great men who could afford a literate slave, and those who read out texts, literary or otherwise, to their masters, in business sessions, during travel, or at dinner parties and as entertainments. Dictation to a secretary figure, probably repeated several times with successive drafts, was the key process of literary composition. In some cases, such as Martial, we do not know for sure whether or not a particular author did it like that – Martial does not tell us. In other cases, such as Virgil, Cicero, Horace and both Plinys, we can be sure that they did. That creates a likelihood that Martial did too, even if his means were so comparatively modest that the younger Pliny had to give him some travel money to get back to Spain.

A literary or other work came about through an oral process of composition, or rather an iteration between oral and written, between high-class 'author' and menial slave 'secretary'. In that iteration between spoken word and text-on-paper that was characteristically Roman, one may speculate about what positive contribution such menials may have made to the literary and intellectual quality of their master's work: one may suspect, quite a lot. Rome's slaves, the literate ones, were the essential mediators of the transfer of the oral to the written and back to the oral. High skill and slavery were not incompatible. One consequence of this was that slaves, if not already accomplished in the arts of writing or of reading – and these, as we have seen, appear to have been separable skills, often practised by separate slaves but sometimes by the same one – were specially trained up in these skills and in the slave markets could be sold on for appropriately higher purchase prices that reflected their higher utility value.

Seneca in one of his letters is quite rude, in a snobby but illustrative way, about a rich man called Calvisius Sabinus, who paid large sums of money for slaves who had memorised all the works of Homer and Hesiod.⁴² Sabinus bored his guests at dinner with half-forgotten lines learnt from these slaves. In other words, he regarded the knowledge inside the heads of his slaves as his knowledge – the slaves were merely external memory devices. Thus it is arguable that upper-class Romans neither read much in our sense of 'read' (they had slaves to read to them⁴³) nor physically wrote much, in our sense of 'write' – they dictated to slaves or freedmen. Dio Chrysostom says explicitly that it is better to have someone reading to you because that way you get more benefit from it.⁴⁴ His exact words are instructive. You get the best from texts

not casually by reading them yourself, but by having them read to you by others, preferably by men who know how to render the lines pleasurable.

Note who is the casual reader and who is the expert reader.⁴⁵ Slavery, and the high skill of these literary slaves, made it a totally different landscape to any other epoch of high literary activity that I am aware of. The obvious comparison might be with Greece, and in particular with Athens in its cultural hey-day. But I have been unable to find any references at all to slaves assisting in the production of Greek literature. There are just a couple of references to books being bought in the *agora* at Athens. The schools, like Aristotle's Lyceum, had libraries, but we do not know who created the texts in them, or how. There is a reference in Plato's *Theaetetus* to a slave being told to read a text, but slaves were, in the main, just general dogsbodies.⁴⁶ Even rich Athenians appear to have had 20 or fewer slaves on their domestic staff, as opposed to the many hundreds kept by rich Romans. So at Athens there was presumably much less scope for specialisation among slaves, even if there had been a supply of literate slaves in the first place.

The prevalence of slaves on the Roman scene also explains why metaphors deriving from slavery/freedom are so strikingly common in Roman writers' own references to their books and to their success or failure.⁴⁷ Word plays on *liber* = book and *liber* = freed slave were common – and not just by semantic accident. The near-universal presence of slaves also helps to explain why Roman distribution of books took the form that it did.

Getting into circulation: from private space to public space

What did Roman authors do to compose and launch their new works and get them into circulation? Unfortunately, there is no treatise or manual left behind by the Romans to tell us at length about their authoring and publishing processes, nothing (or nothing that has survived) equivalent to, say, Vitruvius on architecture¹ or Cato on agriculture.² The result is that we have to make what we can of what we have in Latin texts of the period – passing references, bits of letters between friends, occasional incomplete descriptions, words used but not closely defined (why should they be?), words used in (apparently) several meanings, different words used with (apparently) much the same meaning, poetic circumlocutions. The challenge is to analyse the Latin terminology that the Romans used in a way that is internally consistent and yields a truer picture of the sociology of publishing at Rome.

How does Roman terminology, freed from the false assumption that it indicates something like modern practice, begin to sketch in the actual book world of Rome? The key role of the *recitatio* (a semi-public platform reading) as the Roman equivalent of ‘the act of publication’ and the pivotal event in the life (or death) of a new literary work, is separately discussed in the next chapter, given its central importance. This chapter examines certain clusters of Latin verbs that are closely associated with books and ‘publishing’ at Rome, and discusses what these ‘activity words’ tell us about Roman literary society and how it functioned. The clusters are:

1. Words about writing and authoring – *scribo*, *dicto*
2. Words about reading – *lego*
3. Words about putting into circulation – *publicare*, *edere*, *emittere*, *divulgare*, plus equivalent Greek terms.

1. Words about writing

The Latin verb *scribo* is the most obvious equivalent to the English verb ‘write’, but it has an even wider range of meanings. The *Oxford Latin Dictionary*³ lists no less than 15 separable meanings. These range from the physical act of inscribing or writing down letters, spelling, making a record, drawing up a financial transaction or a law text, naming in a will,

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to composing a letter or literary composition and/or writing an account of something. It is an even more general term than its English equivalent, but contains the same dual meaning of the physical act of writing and the mental act of composing.⁴ It leaves open the question, which we have already encountered, of whether one and the same person was engaged in both the physical and the mental activity – or whether it was separate people. This same question is also raised, perhaps more forcefully and interestingly, by the Latin verb *dicto*. It may mean ‘to say repeatedly’,⁵ or it may by extension mean ‘to indicate matter to be written down, to ‘compose’.⁶ In this latter meaning, it is hardly distinguishable from *scribo*, except with the clear indication that composing was being done by a process of dictation and iteration i.e. that two persons were involved, to-ing and fro-ing the text between spoken and written, master and slave, author and scribe.

2. Words about reading

The Latin verb *lego* also has an interesting variety of meaning that differentiates it from today’s verb ‘read’, even though it is the most obvious English-Latin translation. *Lego* can mean (and by origin may have meant) ‘to gather, select, pick or traverse’, thus recalling the difficult process of reading or deciphering a Latin text in *scriptura continua* (the non-punctuated river of letters). It then develops so as to mean to read,⁷ whether silently or more usually aloud,⁸ and does not necessarily mean that only one person is involved. There may be an unspoken reference to the *lector* or slave-reader who may also be there.

3. Words about ‘putting into circulation’

This cluster of ‘activity’ words consists of words like *editio* and its verb *edere* and what appear to be near-synonyms for the verb, such as *publicare*, *emittere* and *divulgare*. Alongside these Latin terms are the closely related trio of Greek terms *ekdosis*, *paradosis* and *diadosis*, whose usage has a strong bearing on what the Latin terms may be taken to signify.⁹ What these verbs collectively signify is that putting a literary (or other) composition into ‘circulation’ was radically different to anything denoted by that modern term.

Publicare. This Latin verb cannot simply be translated as ‘to publish’ in the modern sense, despite the lexical similarity and the derivation of one from the other. If it is so translated, it must be with a clear understanding of what is and is not implied by the Latin term. *Publicare* not only lacks almost all the assumptions and implications that go with the modern term, but implies a different set of circumstances. *Publicare* means ‘to make public’ or ‘make public property’, even ‘to throw open to the public’. By extension, it means ‘to make known’, ‘reveal’, ‘disclose’ and hence in a

limited sense 'publish' – limited in the sense that *publicare* signifies, but only signifies, the act of making something hitherto private (say, a text which you as author have been working on) into something public, available for others to copy, read and hand on. It carries no implications as to how or by whom this transfer from private to public status is effected.

It is not irrelevant, in the light of comments by, for example, Horace,¹⁰ about the chanciness of what happens to a text that is 'published', to note that *publicare* can also mean to prostitute oneself – an overtone that many an aristocratic author contemplating the fate of his literary product, once it escapes his hands into the commons, must have been aware of. This sense that a work, once subject to *editio* ('handing out' – see below), was lost and out of control, seems to have persisted throughout the Roman period – for example, it finds its echo in around 400 CE in Symmachus.¹¹

Emittere. This verb has as its root meaning 'to let go, or send out' and so in that (again limited) sense 'to publish'. It may also mean 'to utter or emit' a sound. Once again there is a less-than-dignified usage of the verb, as in Suetonius' comment¹² about the emperor Claudius that *flatum crepitumque ventris emisit* (i.e. he farted a lot) where Suetonius seems to be suggesting a direct and unflattering parallel between this and Claudius' attempts as an author, remarking that Claudius liked to play the dice *de cuius arte librum emisit* – 'about the techniques of which he issued a book' – thus using the same word for issuing a fart and issuing a book. But in general, Latin authors seem to mean much the same by *emittere* as by *publicare* – the act of sending out or letting go or releasing something from the private status to the public status. Thus Cicero qualifies a comment by saying *si quando aliquid dignum nostro nomine emisimus* – 'if I have ever sent out anything worthy of my name'.¹³ Quintilian says that the bookseller Tryphon has been pressing him to *emittere* his books on oratory i.e. to let them out of his own hands into those of someone like Tryphon who can therefore copy and sell them.¹⁴ Pliny speaks of *emittere libros* – 'to release [my] books'.¹⁵

Divulgare. This seems to have a similar meaning to *emittere*, that is, not far from its contemporary English descendant 'divulge' but with the nuance of 'broadcasting' a work to some general public. Cicero says that he is sending a book to Atticus for copying by the latter's *librarii* so that it can then be *divulgari*, i.e. be put into the public domain.¹⁶ There may even be a hint of 'vulgarising' a work by allowing the general public to get at it.

Edere/editio. It has been tempting for translators to render *editio* as 'edition' and therefore *edere* as 'to publish'. But *edere* signifies, not to 'edit', but 'to make public'. Thus *edere* normally means much the same as *emittere* or the other verbs discussed above, i.e. to send out or hand out a text. Similarly, the noun *editio* does not normally mean 'edition' in the modern sense, but the act of 'handing out' or 'giving out' a text. Quintilian in his letter to the bookseller Tryphon¹⁷ refers to Horace's *Ars Poetica* and the poet's advice there¹⁸ to wait nine years before the 'handing out' (*editio*)

of a work, since, says Horace, 'once sent out you can't recall it' – *nescit vox missa reverti*. Note also the interesting use of *vox* ('voice') as a synonym for a book. Similarly, in the introduction to Book 1 of his work on oratory, Quintilian says that two of his books on rhetoric were already 'being carried about' (*ferebantur*, which the Loeb edition¹⁹ translates as 'circulating' but surely means more like 'being handed around') despite not having been *editi* by him, not 'given out' by him but as a result of a rash act of *editio* (i.e. handing around) by friends i.e. they had not been formally made available to others by Quintilian himself, but others had pre-empted him by making them so available. There are other, similar examples elsewhere in Quintilian, in Pliny, and in Tacitus.²⁰

There is however another shade of meaning to the Latin *editio*. That is where Quintilian refers to a line of Homer that is 'not found in every edition' – *non in omni editione reperitur*.²¹ Could this imply an edition or editions, in multiple identical copies, as in a modern edition? More likely, he means Homeric texts as edited and annotated by different scholars or grammarians, so meaning more like our 'version'. Another case is where Quintilian says that where a speech has been delivered in a shortened form, *editio habebit omnia* which the Loeb translation renders not unfairly as 'the published version will have it all' but which more properly means 'the version handed out in writing will have the full text of the speech'.²² There are also Latin quotations in which two of the above terms occur in the same sentence, showing a nuance of meaning that is initially hard to grasp but was clearly meaningful to Roman authors. Seneca in one of his *Moral Essays* remarks²³ that *monumenta ingeniorum publicavit editio* ('works of genius are published for everybody' – Loeb translation²⁴) and Statius speaks²⁵ of a letter which *de editione Thebaidos meae publicavi* ('the letter which I published concerning the appearance of my [poem the] Thebaid' – Loeb translation again²⁶).

What is interesting in both cases is the implied connection between the act of *editio* and the status of *publicare*. Clearly, the two words cannot have exactly the same meaning or significance and cannot both be translated as 'publish/publication' without descent into tautology. So in the case of Seneca's remark, could it mean that the works were 'edited' in the modern sense before 'publication'? In the case of Statius, the Loeb translator is, wisely, more cautious, rendering *editio* as 'appearance', a neutral term, but others might take it as an edition in the modern sense. Both quotations however make better sense if the act of *editio* is taken at its basic meaning, that is, the author's pivotal decision to allow a work to pass out of his private hands, and *publicare* is taken at its basic meaning, that of the work arriving into or being in the public domain. Thus both Seneca and Statius are describing basically the same process whereby a work is put into the public domain by the act of sending it out from the author's hands into the hands of others.

As if to further distance Roman usage of this word cluster from the

modern English usage, another derivative from the *edere* root is the noun *editor*, which in Latin denotes, not the modern 'editor', as of a newspaper or magazine or book, but the person who sponsored and presided over a set of games or entertainments, such as the chariot races. That sponsorship function was called *editio*, so that the same Latin word indicates providing an event for the public and providing a text for the public.

The Greek terms *ekdosis/paradosis/diadosis*. The sense of *edere* and *editio* discussed above is similar to, perhaps almost identical to, the meaning of the Greek verb *ekdidonai* and its noun *ekdosis*. Given the continuity of tradition between the two literary cultures, that may be no accident. But if anything, the usage of these Greek words seems to have been more nuanced than the Latin. Those nuances may help to further clarify what the Romans were talking about when they spoke of *edere* and *editio*. In his illuminating analysis, on which I draw, Groningen²⁷ in fact discussed three related Greek terms – *paradosis*, *diadosis* and *ekdosis* – each with interesting differences.

Paradosis signifies (to paraphrase Groningen) the passage of a text from hand to hand, from generation to generation, from century to century, from papyrus scroll to codex book. *Paradosis* begins when the text starts to be copied and recopied from manuscript to manuscript. It is the 'handing down' of a text over time – the textual or manuscript tradition.

By origin *diadosis* signified the passing of something between individuals, say, food rations between soldiers, money between debtor and creditor. With a text, it signified the way in which it passes from hand to hand (that is, between the living who are interested) by a process of copying. The text is 'passing around'.

The first step in this process of *diadosis* is the *ekdosis*, the sending out of the first copy, or autograph, to a friend or patron; or if not that, then the sending of the second copy, with the author keeping the first copy, to a bookseller like Tryphon or Atrectus. *Ekdosis* in this Greek (and Roman) context has very specific connotations. By origin the word signified the ceding to someone else of something over which one previously had the power or the rights, for example property, or a son or daughter in marriage, and allowing it/him/her to pass into the power of that other person – in effect, abandoning them, with all the risks that this entails. Thus, the author was by this step ceding the power over his text to other (largely unknown) persons. This sense of *ekdosis* sheds light on what the Latin equivalent term *editio* really signified to the Romans. It was a big and irrevocable step to take.

Into the public domain

What is impressive about the Latin terminology and the big cluster of words with similar or related meanings is that they show how the key distribution processes for a Roman author were not about publishers,

bookshops and libraries, but about letting the new work go from their jealously guarded private space out into the public domain where it may be handed around by others and handed down from generation to generation (or not), by the usual means of copying, often by slave specialists. The key distinction for an author was between a work still held in that private space, and one let loose into the chancy world of peer-to-peer circulation between persons unknown, in places unknown. How a new work moved from the first status to the second, often and perhaps mainly via the *recitatio*, is the subject of the next chapter.