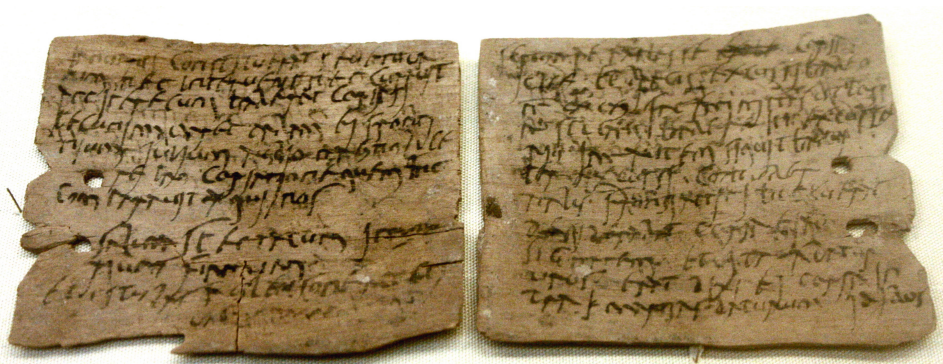
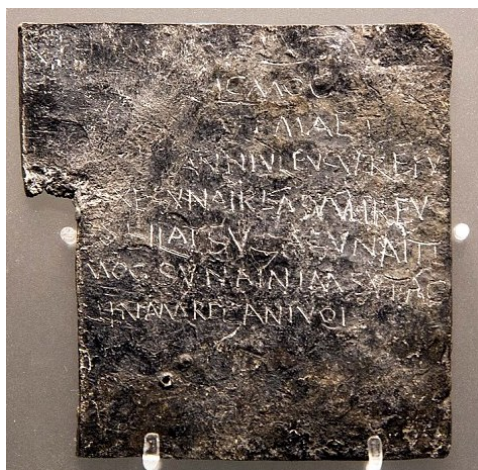


Writing Supports and The Form of the Book: Tablet, Roll, Codex

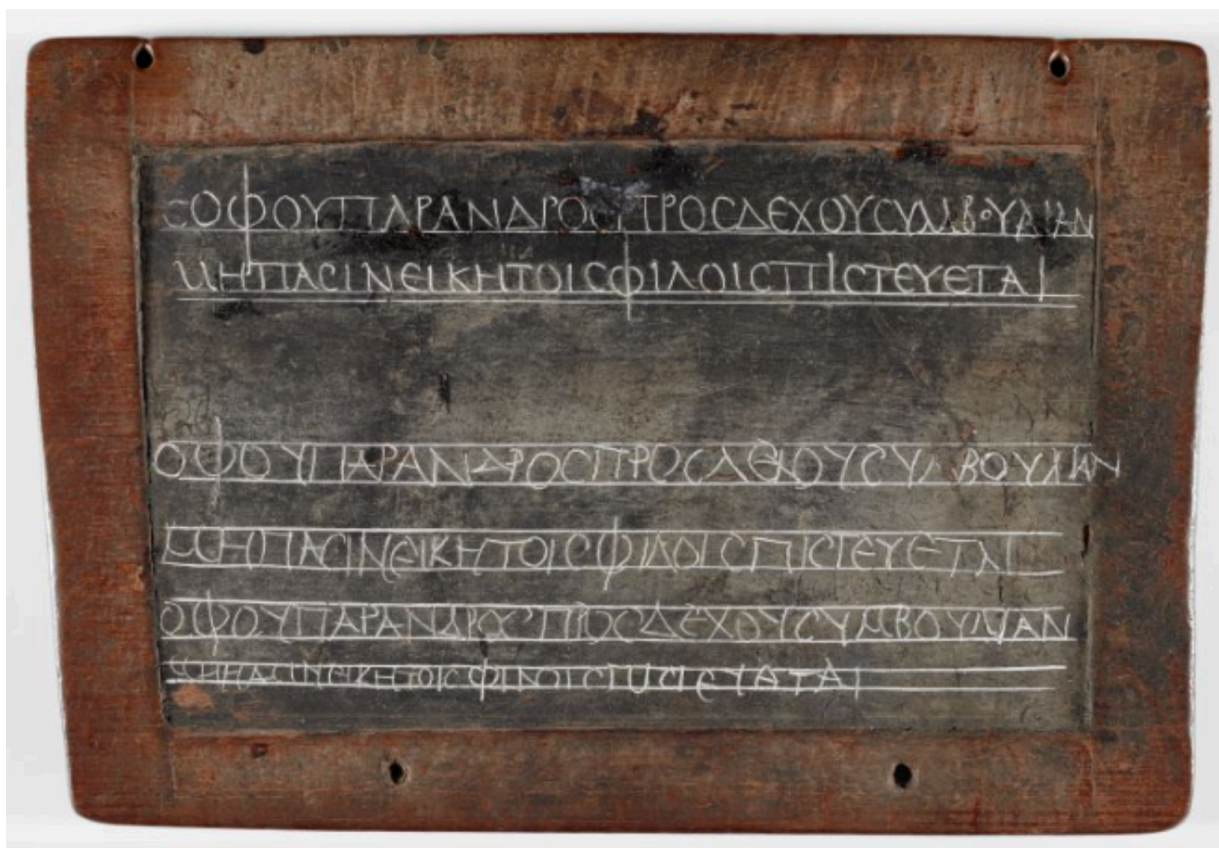
“Writing Support” = the material one writes on — papyrus, parchment, paper, wax, etc.

TABLETS

Lead, wood, and other surfaces were used as writing surfaces in antiquity, e.g. Roman curse tablets on lead (l), letters on wood like the Vindolanda tablets (r):



Wax tablets were used for note-taking, drafts, student work, etc. , using a stylus as writing implement. On this 2nd-century Greek example, a student copies his teacher's writing:

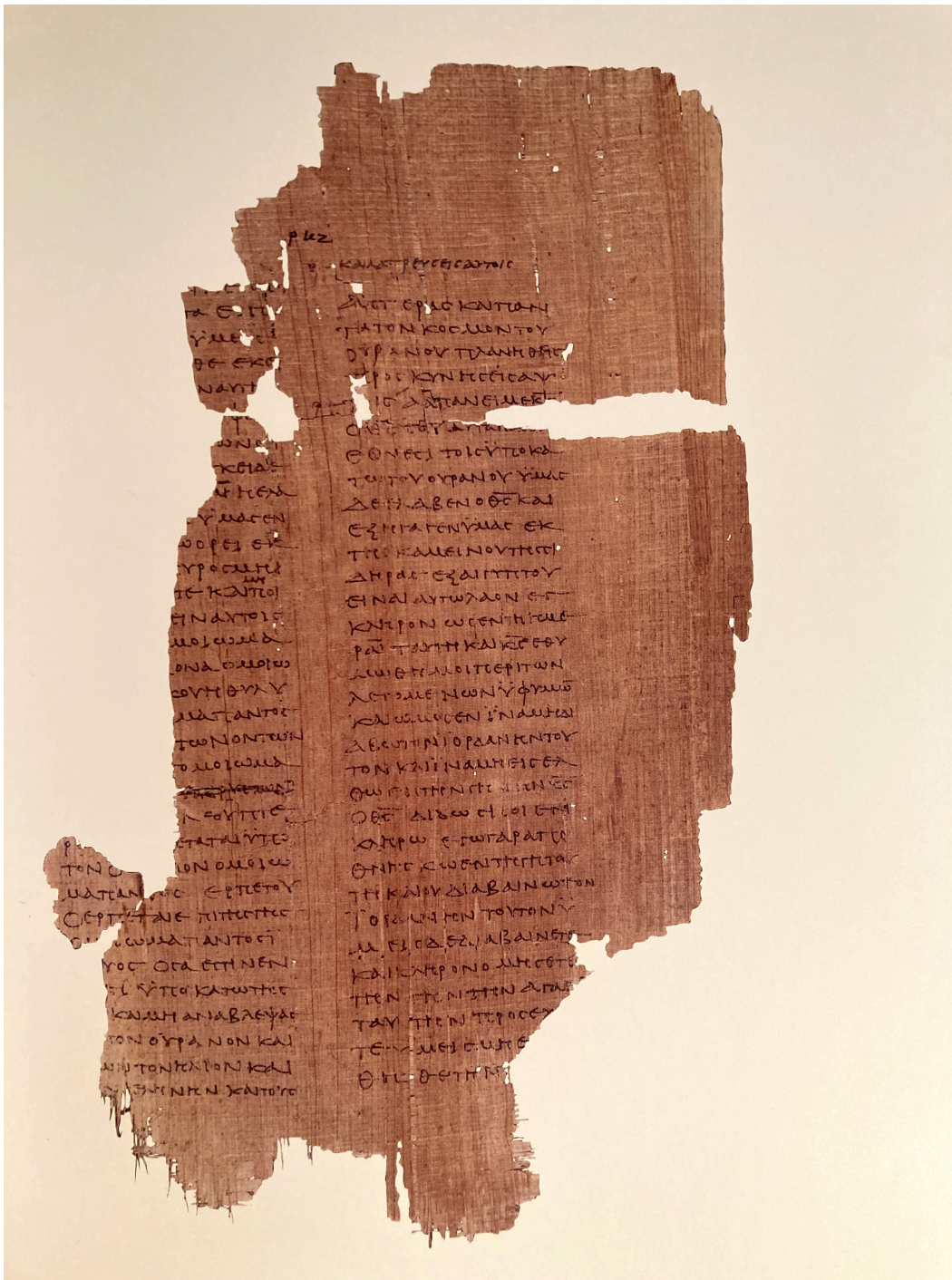
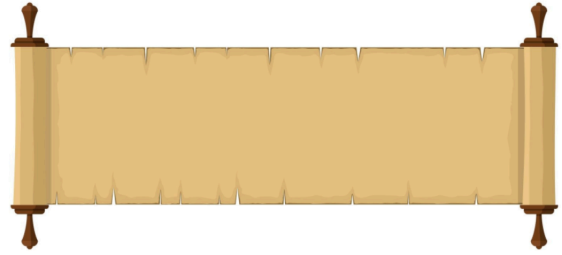


PAPYRUS and the ROLL

Papyrus is a fibrous reed native to Egypt. The pith of the papyrus was pressed into strips which were then joined to make long rolls. Strips typically 4"-9" wide and rolls ~15' long.

Papyrus roll = **volumen** (pl. volumina), hence our word "volume."

Books were rolled side to side like a Torah scroll.
(Documents could be rolled top to bottom like a medieval movie herald's scroll.)



This Greek biblical papyrus fragment shows typical column layout and the texture of papyrus as a writing surface.

PARCHMENT and the CODEX

Parchment (aka vellum) is animal skin (normally sheep or cow) prepared as a writing surface by soaking in a lime solution, stretching on a frame, and scraping. It is *extremely* durable, unlike papyrus, and can be folded, sewn, etc. without breaking.

A **codex** is a book in the form of our modern book: leaves folded to make booklets, which are sewn down the spine and then sewn together onto supports to make a larger book hinged at the spine.

One sheet of parchment folded in half at the spine is a **bifolium**, which makes 2 leaves and 4 pages. A leaf is called a **folio**. Bifolia, typically 4 or 5, are nested together to make a **gathering** or **quire**.



When sheets are assembled into a quire, the right-hand page of the opening is known as the **recto** and the reverse of that page is the **verso**.

We usually refer to manuscript pages not as page 1, page 2, etc. , but by folio number and recto or verso designation: folio 1 recto, folio 1 verso, folio 2 recto, etc. These are abbreviated fol. (or f.) 1r, fol. 1v, fol. 2r, etc. (Pagination is a late-medieval development.)

When parchment is made, a visible and tangible difference usually remains between the **hair** and **flesh sides** of the skin. It was normal practice to arrange the sheets in a quire so that hair side faced hair side and flesh side faced flesh side when the book was opened, for a consistent look within any given opening.



The parchment is **ruled** to guide the writing, normally before sewing. We will look at examples of ruling together online.

The quires are then sewn together at the spine.

The cords onto which the quires are sewn, as shown here, can then be threaded through holes in wooden boards, which are then covered with leather, to make a sturdy binding.

The transition from roll to codex as the normal form of the book in late antiquity is a subject of perpetual scholarly debate, but whatever the reason, we can show that it happened.

2nd century: 90% of surviving books are rolls.

4th century: 80% of surviving books are codices.

6th century: nearly 100% of surviving books are codices.

80% of surviving Christian books from late antiquity are in codex form.*

A few early codices are made of papyrus, or of papyrus mixed with parchment, but overwhelmingly the transition to the codex was also a transition to parchment. Why? Papyrus supply? Papyrus's lack of suitability for sewing? Parchment's better durability, suitability to folding and sewing?

*Source for these statistics: William A. Johnson, "The Ancient Book," *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall (Oxford, 2009), 256-281.

Manuscript shelfmarks:

A **shelfmark** is a manuscript's call number, and it has a standard form:

City, Library, MS [Fonds] Number

The **fonds** (French for "source") is in a sub-collection within a larger library collection. In practice, that is usually the name of a collection that has been absorbed into a larger collection: the name of a collector (as in the British Library's Cotton, Harley, Sloane, etc. collections) or a previous constituent library (Vatican library, Palatine library, etc., making up the modern Vatican Library.) Not all libraries have fonds.

Examples:

London, British Library, MS Harley 1775 (Harley is the fonds.)

St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 1394 (No fonds; St. Gall's is a single, intact medieval library.)

Famous manuscripts also typically have nicknames. Examples:

Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat.lat. 3225	The Vatican Virgil
London, British Library, MS Harley 1775	The Harley Gospels
Dublin, Library of the Trinity College, MS 58 (A.I.6)	The Book of Kells
San Marino, The Huntington Library, MS EL 26 C 9	The Ellesmere Chaucer

Variations in shelfmark form include using Latin ("Cod." i.e. codex for MS) and placing the "MS" after the fonds, but if you have the general idea you can make sense of most modern shelfmark usage.

Big, famous libraries are often abbreviated: BL = British Library, BAV = Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, BNF (formerly BN) = Bibliothèque nationale de France, etc.