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Wryly Noted-Books About Books

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Wryly Noted — Books About Books

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Inside Roman Libraries: Book Collections and Their Management in Antiquity by **George W. Houston**. (ISBN: 978-1-4696-1781-7, University of North Carolina Press 2014, \$29.00)

This is a highly specialized look at ancient Roman libraries, their contents, physical arrangement, and day to day management. In spite of its technical bent, the book is a treasure trove of more general literary and library history. It is of particular interest to librarians, but also to anyone interested in the history of the book. The author employs the works of **Varro**, **Cicero**, **Galen** and other ancient authors to demonstrate the use of personal libraries. He also makes use of book lists that have survived from antiquity to show the holdings of these libraries. Architectural plans based on the surviving ruins of ancient libraries, such as those at Ephesus and Pergamum, are employed to show their layout and day to day functions.

The main focus of the book is on the continuing discoveries at ancient Roman sites in Herculaneum and at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt. These sites hold actual scrolls that allow us to see more clearly how ancient libraries were organized and managed. These two sites contain the only papyrus remains of ancient libraries still extant. In this book the author gives us a thorough accounting of the literary and scientific collections found so far at the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum and at Oxyrhynchus. Both sites are active archeological digs with the Villa being possibly the richest source of undiscovered texts from antiquity. The focus of exploration there has turned incredibly high tech and the latest technology being brought to use is an X-ray cyclotron in Switzerland that is able to scan deep into the charred remains of the surviving scrolls. Archeologists and other scholars have already learned much from the remains at these sites and these new developments promise a real breakthrough.

From literary evidence we discover that most ancient books were not written by their authors, but were rather dictated to scribes, usually slaves. Authors might employ notes, many of which have been found in archeological sites, but the actual writing was done by professional scribes. From studying the surviving papyrus rolls papyrologists have noted the varying quality of transcription that depended on the education and preparation of the scribes. Readers often sought out better copies of books by going to wealthier collectors and having their own copies made.

It is very contemporary to note that bookstores flourished near libraries where they offered up copies of books for sale. Oddly enough, most libraries, even public libraries, did not lend out books. Books were meant to be read in the library and if you wanted a copy of a book you either bought one or had a copy made just for yourself. Some bookstores specialized in “deluxe” editions of texts and others carried

used and rare scrolls. The life span of a papyrus roll could run to three hundred years, so there was ample time for used copies to make their way to market. The best bookstores were in Athens, Alexandria and Rome. Librarians and collectors often visited these cities to grow their collections. Others would send scribes to copy the best texts from the best libraries of which Alexandria stood out above all others. It had a collection of hundreds of thousands of texts, while most libraries, public or private, contained in the hundreds or thousands at most.

There were generally three parts to a Roman library: the armaria where the scrolls were stored, then an area where copying could take place, and finally a repair area. Those who wanted copies brought their own papyrus and ink. The library was well appointed with stools and foot stools.

This book goes into great detail about how scrolls were stored and arranged in libraries. Papyrus scrolls were placed in “armaria” or what we would call wooden cupboards. The decorated armaria surrounded an airy, well lit, and finely appointed reading space. Libraries were built with the goal of providing optimum light for daytime reading, but lamp stands helped out on darker days. Scrolls did not contain much bibliographic information and were identified simply with tags attached to the scroll itself. These tags were called *sillybon*. The arrangement of the scrolls in a library was often written on a papyrus list, but the list was sparse in its bibliographic information, usually only containing the title and author and often the lists were simply chronological accession records. In these libraries the librarian was considered the catalog of last resort. Books were requested from the librarian who then brought the scrolls to the patron. A list of the librarians at the **Imperial Library of Rome** is included in this book. Some of the other library personnel included “glutinatores” who were tasked with repairing worn and damaged papyrus rolls. Damage might come from simple wear and tear, dampness, or from worms that savored the tasty papyrus.

Scrolls were generally only written on one side of the roll, but many were re-used to create new works. These were called *opisthographs*. Scrolls were written and read perpendicularly to the scroll itself, presaging our own printing style. We usually envision ancients reading from a scroll as if reading

a proclamation, but they read text just as we do. Scrolls were gradually replaced by the codex, which is what we call our current form of a book. The codex arose from the note taking tablets the Romans used at school or at lectures. Their codex was a wooden board covered with wax which they marked up with a wooden stylus. The Romans tied up the boards with cord so that they could have multiple pages. They gradually realized that this was a better way to access texts. They then re-purposed their scrolls and our modern book was born.

Scrolls might be read using wooden dowels inserted in the hollow ends of the roll. The wooden dowels would be removed when the scrolls were reshelfed. For traveling, readers had

wooden or leather buckets for carrying their scrolls and lids kept the scrolls protected from the elements.

When the Villa of the Papyri was first discovered and explored in the 1700s many burnt and charred scrolls were thrown away or burnt again, as workers mistook them for burnt branches! The scrolls that survive from Oxyrhynchus owe their longevity to the incredibly dry climate of inland Egypt. Papyrus scrolls have survived in the paper dumps there for over fifteen hundred years. One of the most valuable caches from that find belonged to a woman and we even know her name: **Aurelia Ptolemais**.

Roman libraries were usually divided into Greek and Roman sections, which were two separate libraries that were conjoined. Because of its more ancient history, the Greek portion contained many more works than its Latin counterpart. Roman libraries differed markedly from libraries in Greece where scrolls were stored away in cramped quarters. To the Romans, art and sculpture were necessary parts of a library. There were usually statues of famous authors or even contemporary authors, depending on the scope of the collection. Some also displayed statues of the current emperor (nude or not).

Anyone interested in ancient history and especially ancient Roman history would enjoy this book. For more information about the exciting developments at the Villa of the Papyri you can read from the latest news here: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/herculaneum-scrolls-can-technology-unravel-the-secrets-sealed-by-mt-vesuvius-2000-years-ago/> 🍷

