

OLLI 572

# The Medieval Book

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Fall 2025



# Schedule

**Week 1: The book in antiquity: rolls, tablets, and ancient Roman scripts. Introduction to, and of, the codex.**

**Week 2: Books in Roman late antiquity: the codex; new scripts for Christian texts. The Bible as book.**

**Week 3: The great early English and Irish Bibles: Amiatinus, Lindisfarne, Kells, & al.**

**Week 4: The Carolingian Renaissance**

**Week 5: Gothic book design, the rise of the universities, and the Paris book trade**

**Week 6 : Late medieval books and readers**

**Week 7: The 15th-century book in manuscript and print**



[ruffnotes.org/medievalbook](https://ruffnotes.org/medievalbook)





# **Materials and Forms of the book in the ancient Greco-Roman world**

**ca. 4th c. BCE  
to 5th c. CE  
(Hellenistic period  
through late  
Roman empire)**





# THE ROMAN EMPIRE 395

## ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS

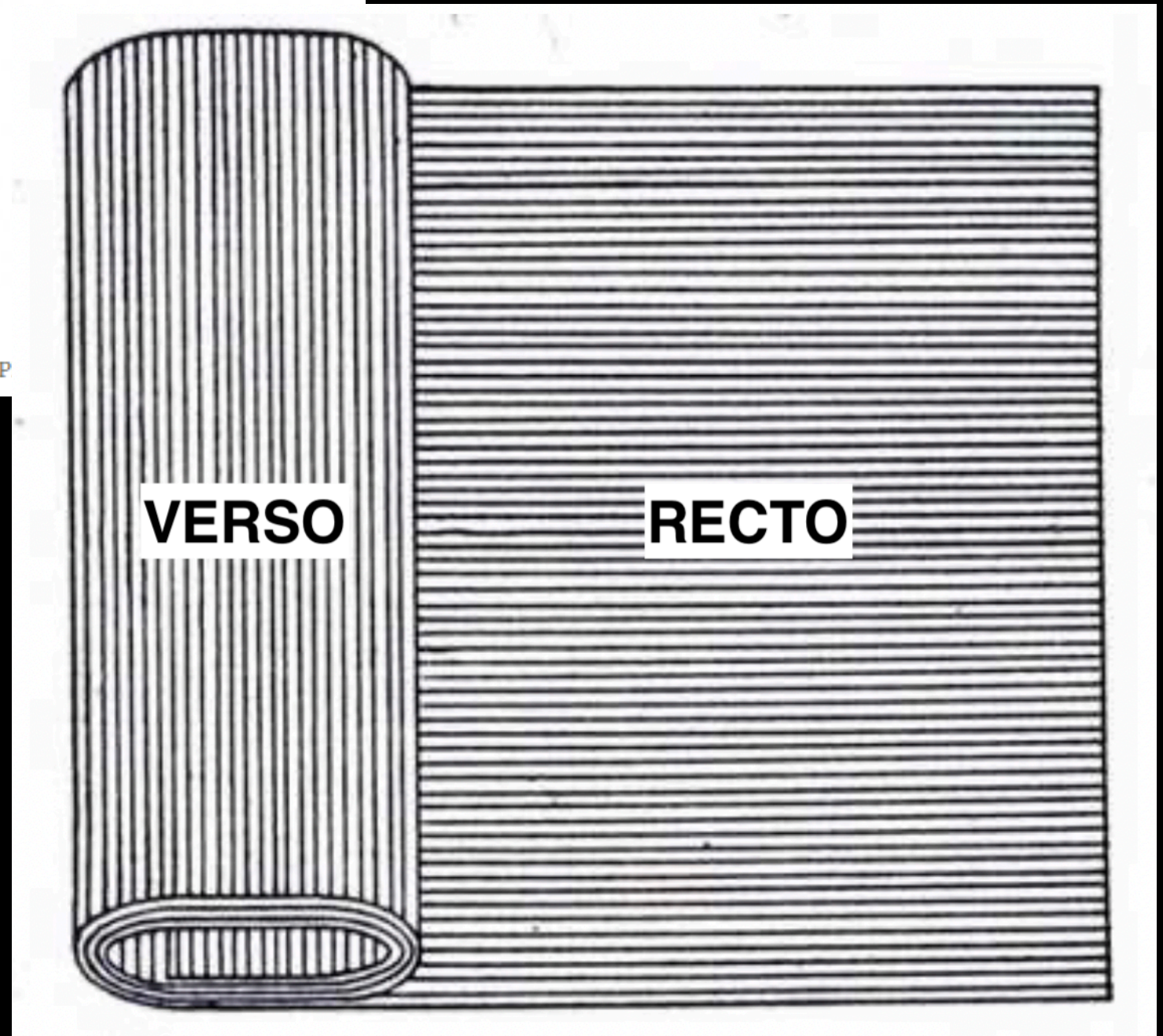






**Papyrus strips laid at right angles to each other, flattened, glued together and smoothed.**

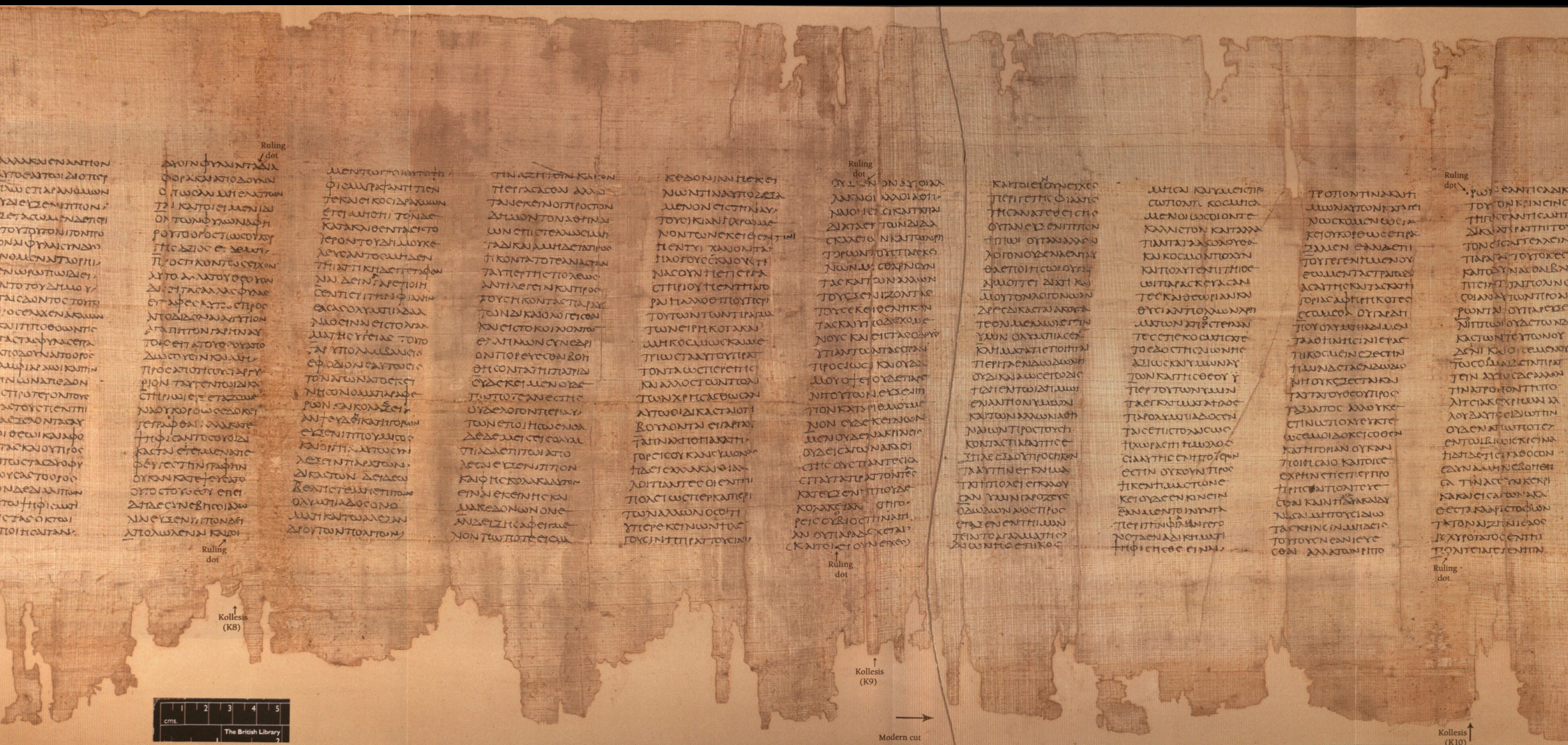
**Tall narrow sheets glued together to form long rolls. The side with the horizontal fibers forms the inside of the roll and is the main writing surface.**





# Papyrus roll = volumen (volume)

## primary form of the book through the 3rd c. CE





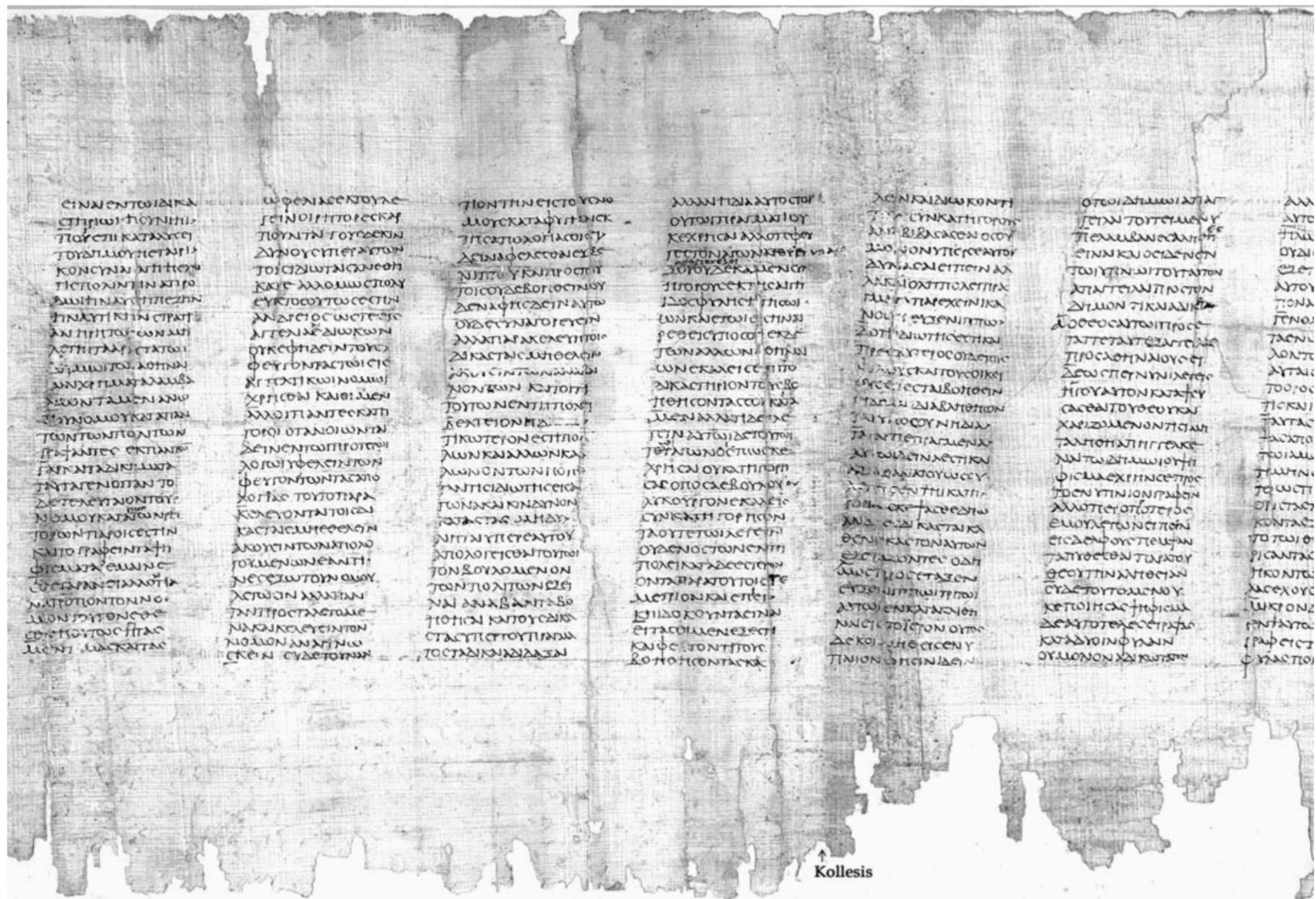


Figure 11.1. MP 1233 (P.Lond.Lit. 132). The Arden papyrus, cols. 29–34.

Speeches of Hyperides in a fragment of a papyrus volumen from ca. 75-125 CE. Note slope of the written columns across the joins between papyrus strips, large margins, fraying.



# **Papyrus in the Mediterranean Economy**

- **Papyrus was effectively a monopoly of Egypt, but was not native to Egypt.**
- **It grew in pools that were the product of human manipulation of the Nile floods.**
- **Papyrus sheets and rolls had to be formed when papyrus was fresh, so they were manufactured in Egypt and sold in the cities of the empire. Papyrus was normally sold in rolls.**
- **Formal writing (books or documents) were commissioned from professional scribes in the Roman world.**



# Parchment rolls in antiquity: the Dead Sea Scrolls as an example



**The Isaiah Scroll from Qumran:  
almost complete Book of Isaiah, parchment,  
24 feet long. Written between 4th and 2nd c. BCE.**



The Isaiah Scroll, detail. Note that parchment sheets are sewn together.





# Papyrology as a field

- Bound up with Egyptology, biblical studies, and the antiquities trade
- Quite separate in disciplinary organization from medieval manuscript studies
- Very, very conservative in its organization
- Very, very secretive



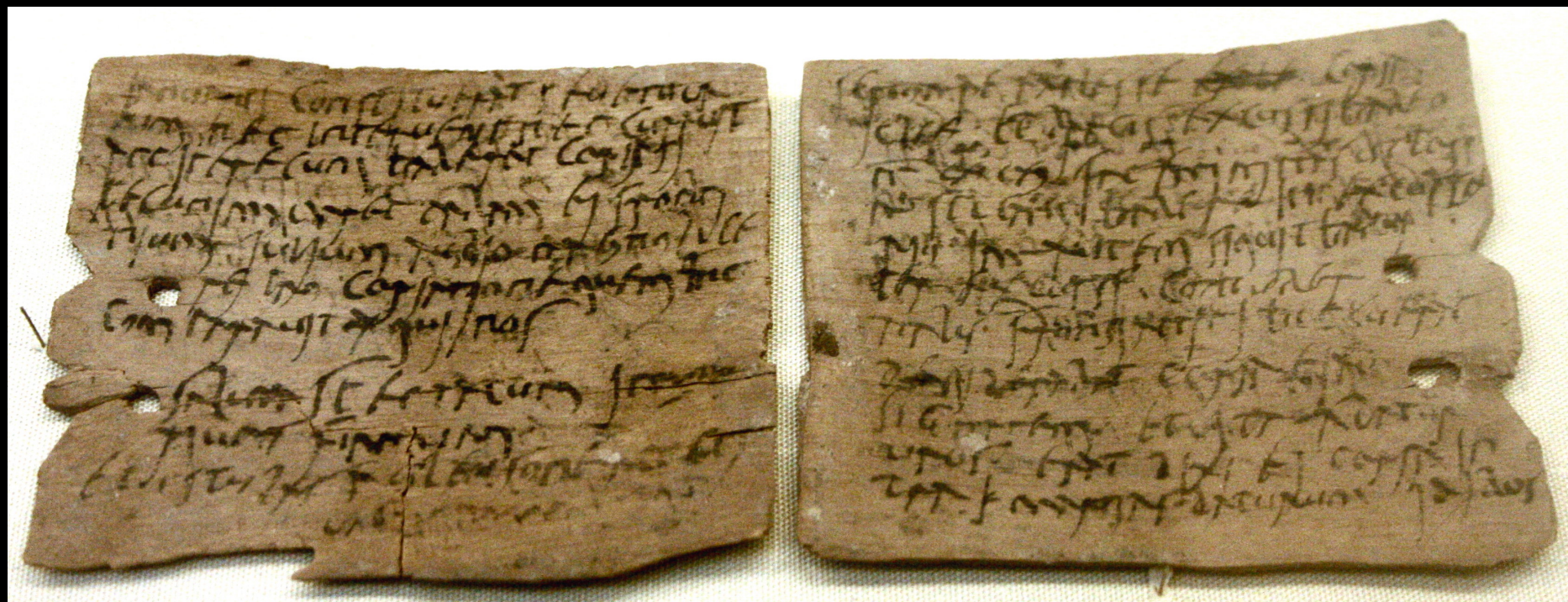


# Other writing supports: Tablets

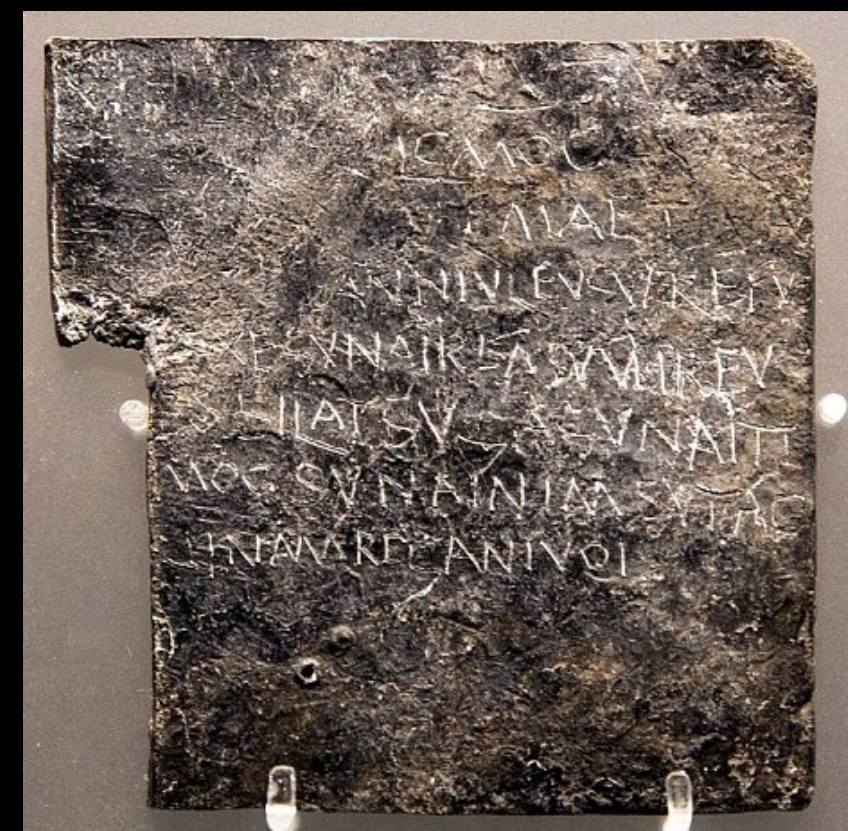
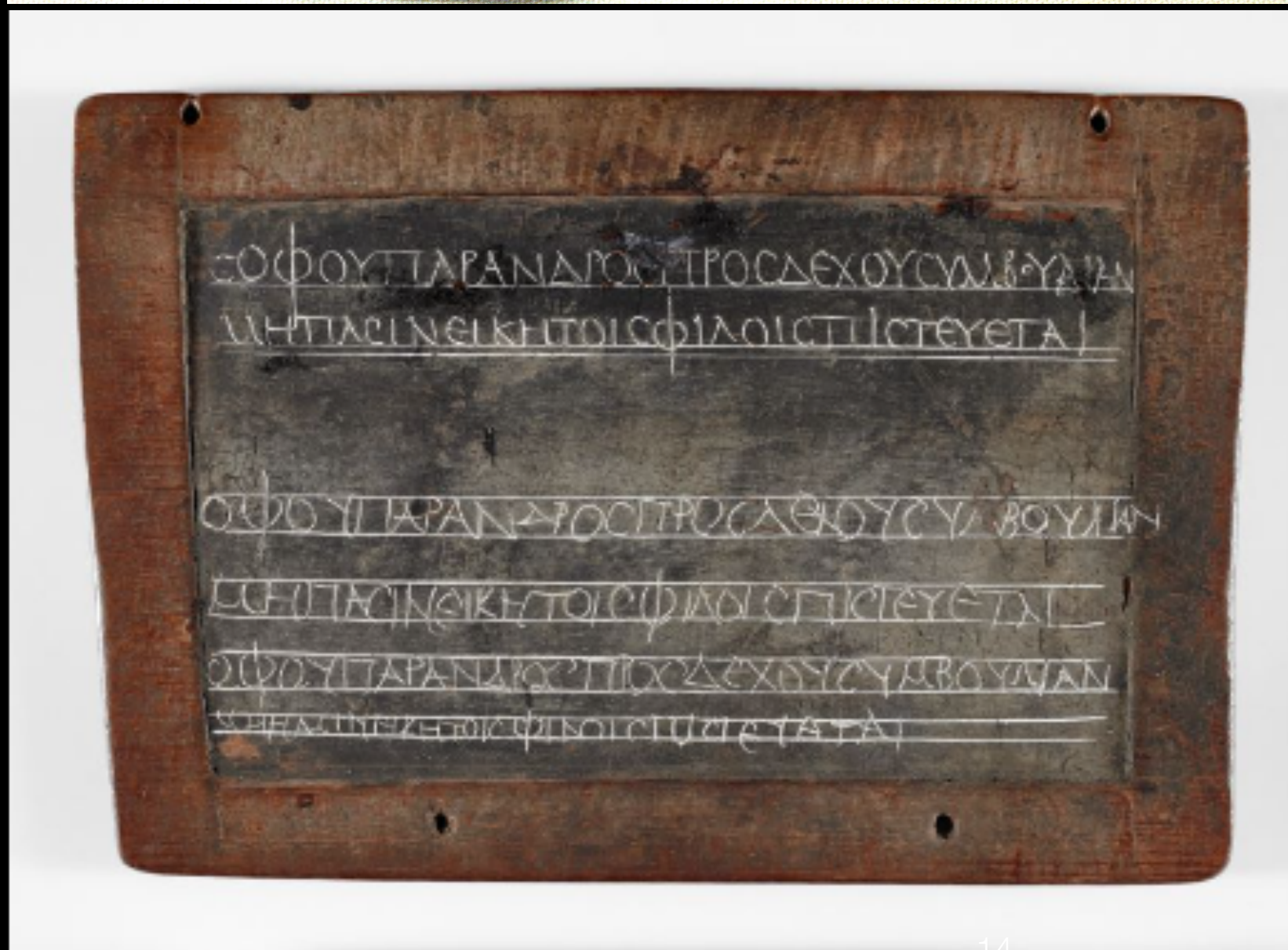


**Fresco from Pompeii, 1st c. CE**





**Tablets:**  
**Wood (left)**  
**Lead (below)**  
**Wax (below left)**







**Fresco from Pompeii, 1st c. CE**



**Multiple wax tablets bound in a booklet  
(Coptic, ca. 500-700 CE)**





**This is called a CAUDEX or CODEX**





**Spoiler: This is also a codex**





**Break from slides  
for script terminology**



# Ancient Roman Scripts



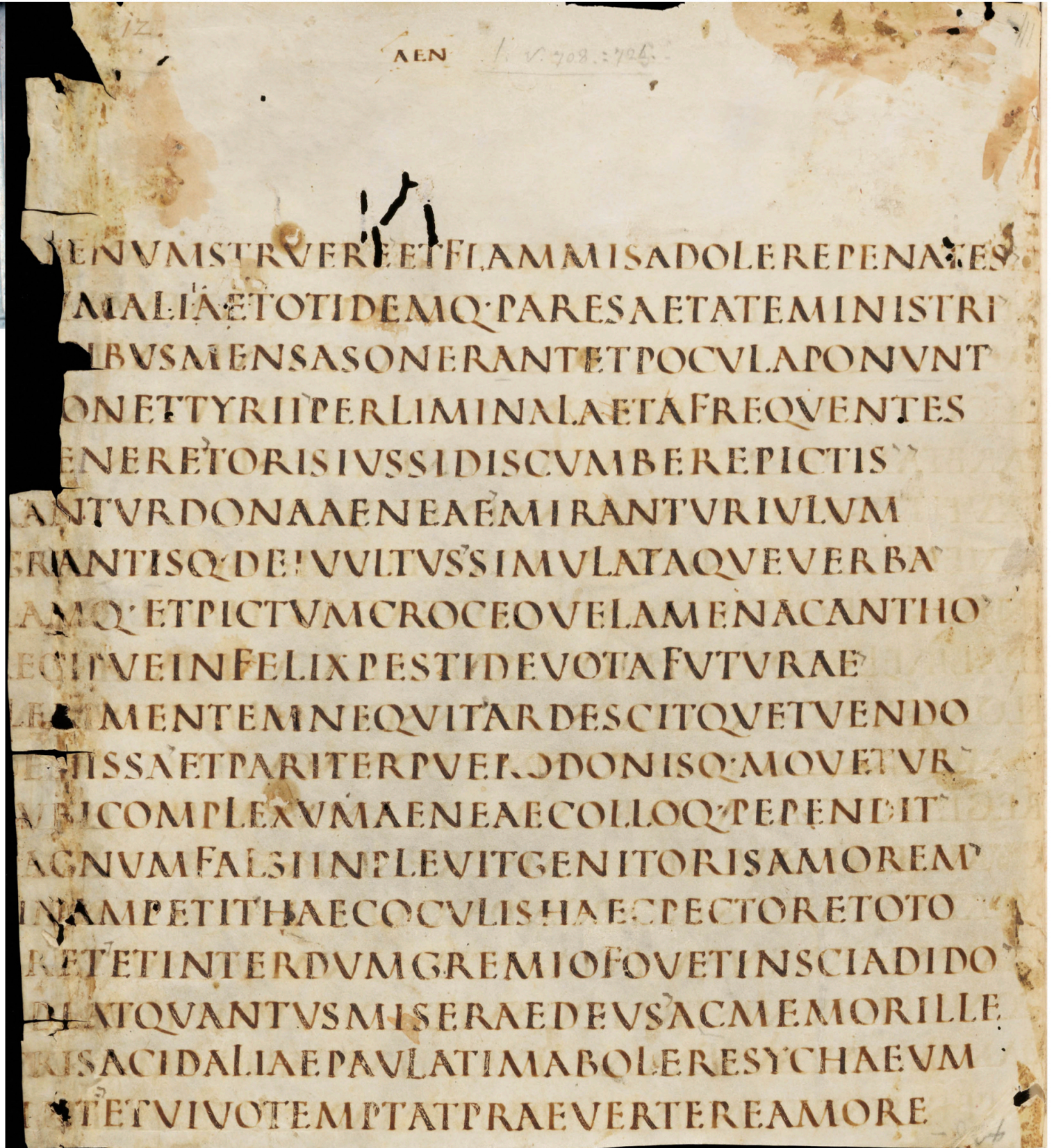
# Square Capitals



**Above: Arch of Trajan inscription, AD 114-118.**

**Right: St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, MS I 394, page 12, 4th-5th century AD. Transcription:**

- 1 [[\*]]enum struere et flammis adolere penates  
2 [[\*]]m aliae totidemq(ue) pares aetate ministri  
3 ibus mensas onerant et pocula ponunt  
4 on et tyrii per limina laeta frequentes  
5 enere toris iussi discumbere pictis  
6 antur dona aeneae mirantur iulum  
7 grantisq(ue) dei uultus simulataque uerba  
8 amq(ue) et pictum croceo uelamen acantho  
9 ecipue infelix pesti deuota futurae  
10 le[[\*]]i mentem nequit ardescitque tuendo  
11 e[[\*]]issa et pariter puero donisq(ue) mouetur  
12 ubi complexum aeneae colloq(ue) pependit  
13 agnum falsi inpleuit genitoris amorem  
14 inam petit haec oculis haec pectore toto  
15 ret et interdum gremio fouet inscia dido  
16 deat quantus miserae deus ac memor ille  
17 ris acidaliae paulatim abolere sychaeum  
18 [[\*\*]]t et uiuo temptat praeuertere amore







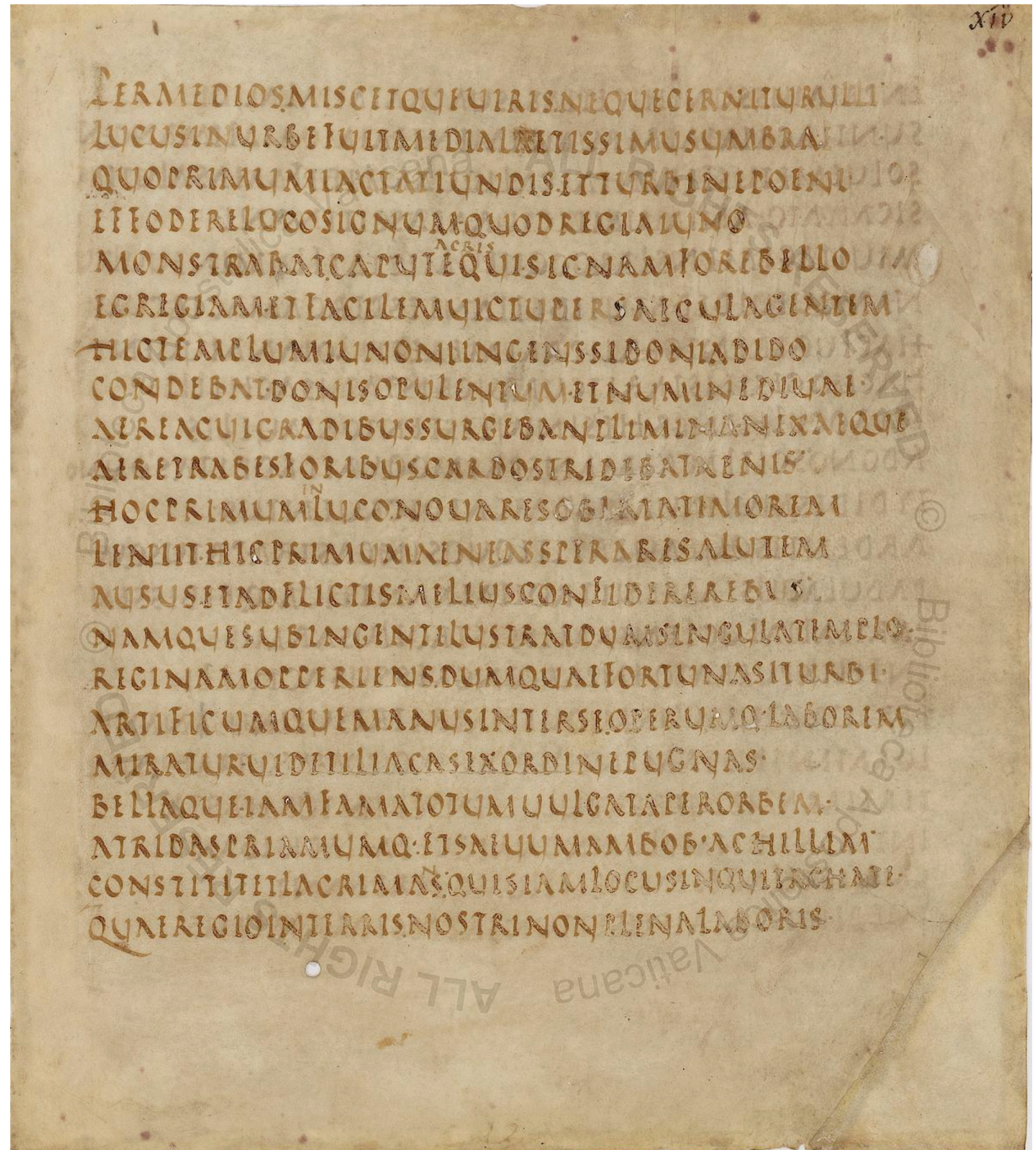
**1st-century CE monumental gilded bronze letters and punctuation marks that had fallen from a public building in Singilia Barba, Andalusia (Málaga Museum)**



## Rustic Capitals

Below: Rustic Capitals used in an inscription.

Right: Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana MS Vat. lat. 3225, "The Vatican Vergil," fol. 14r. Italy, ca. AD 400. The text is Aeneid I.440-460.





The  
Virgilius  
Romanus,  
BAV Vat.  
lat. 3867,  
5th c.

Script:  
Rustic  
Capitals

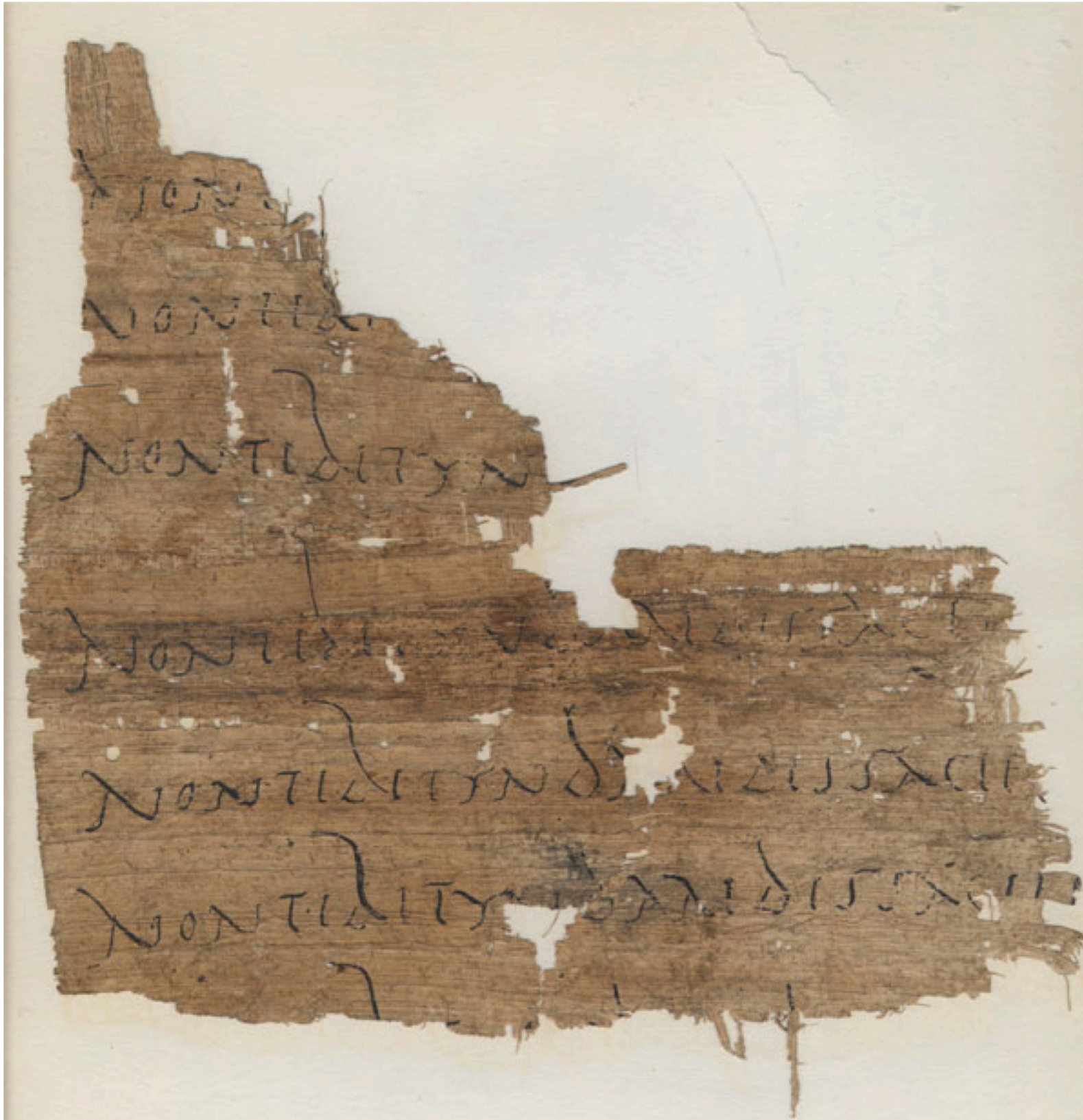
Image:  
Poet with a  
scroll and  
scroll case





## Older Roman Cursive, a.k.a. Ancient Roman Cursive

London, University College, Dept. of Greek and Latin P. 24. 1st c. A.D. Found in Hawara, Egypt.



The scribe is practicing writing Aeneid I, line 601, over and over again. The full line is:

non tibi Tyndaridis facies invisa Lacaenae

The farthest the scribe gets in the surviving fragment is:

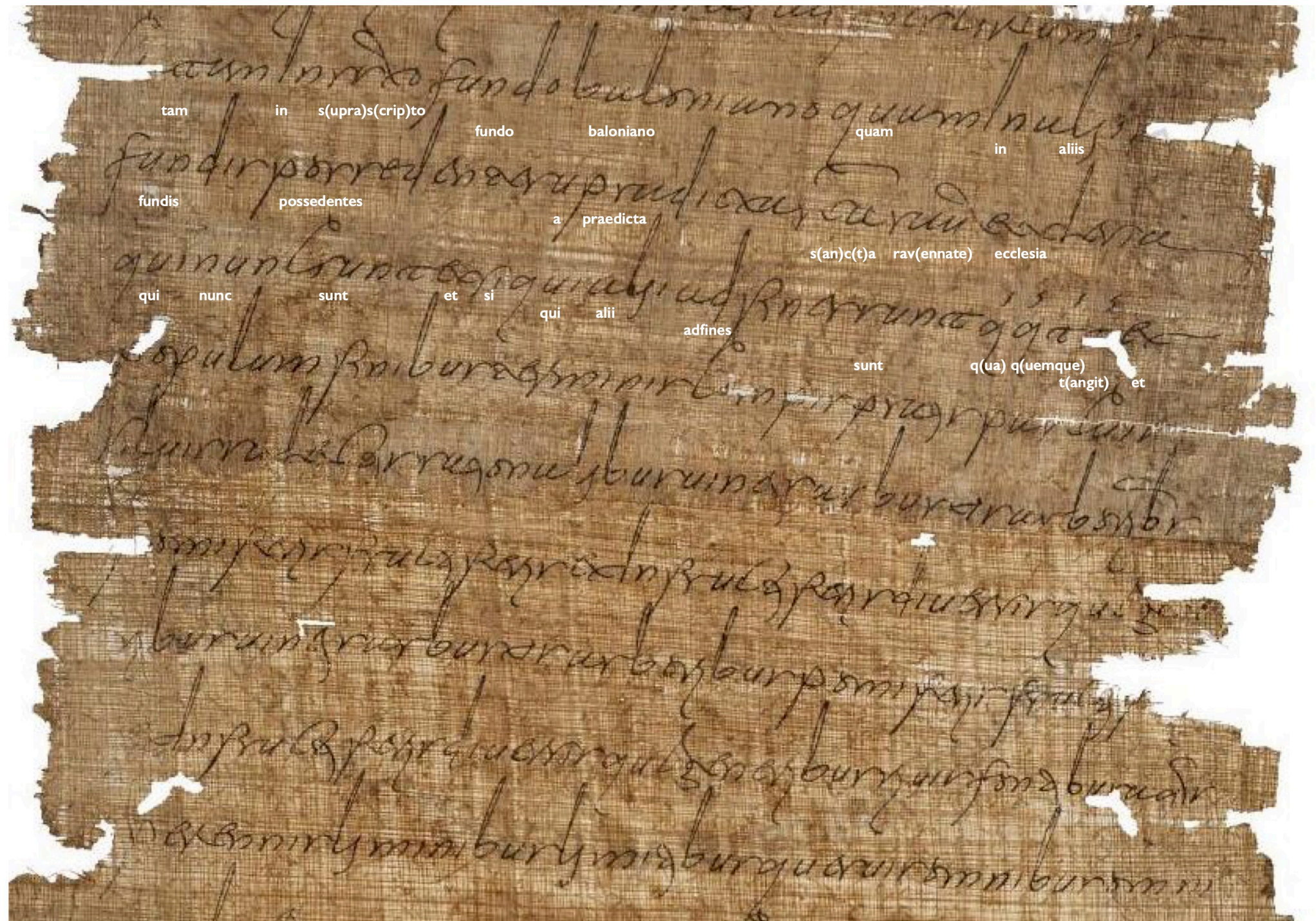
**NONTIBITYNDARIDISFACIE**

See if you can tell **b** from **d** in this script!



**Later Roman Cursive,  
a.k.a. New Roman  
Cursive**

**Detail from Vat. pap.  
lat. 6, a document from  
ca. AD 600,  
documenting a gift by a  
Goth freedwoman  
named Sisivera to the  
Church of Ravenna.**





# **The Codex**

## **materials, structure, & terminology**



## **Materials of the codex:**

**PAPYRUS** was used but is not well suited to the necessary folding and sewing.

**PARCHMENT** is vastly more durable than papyrus, in itself and in all climates.

**Terms: VELLUM = PARCHMENT**, by convention fancier/finer parchment in expensive books a modern auction house wants to sell you. Parchment is the normal term for manuscript description.

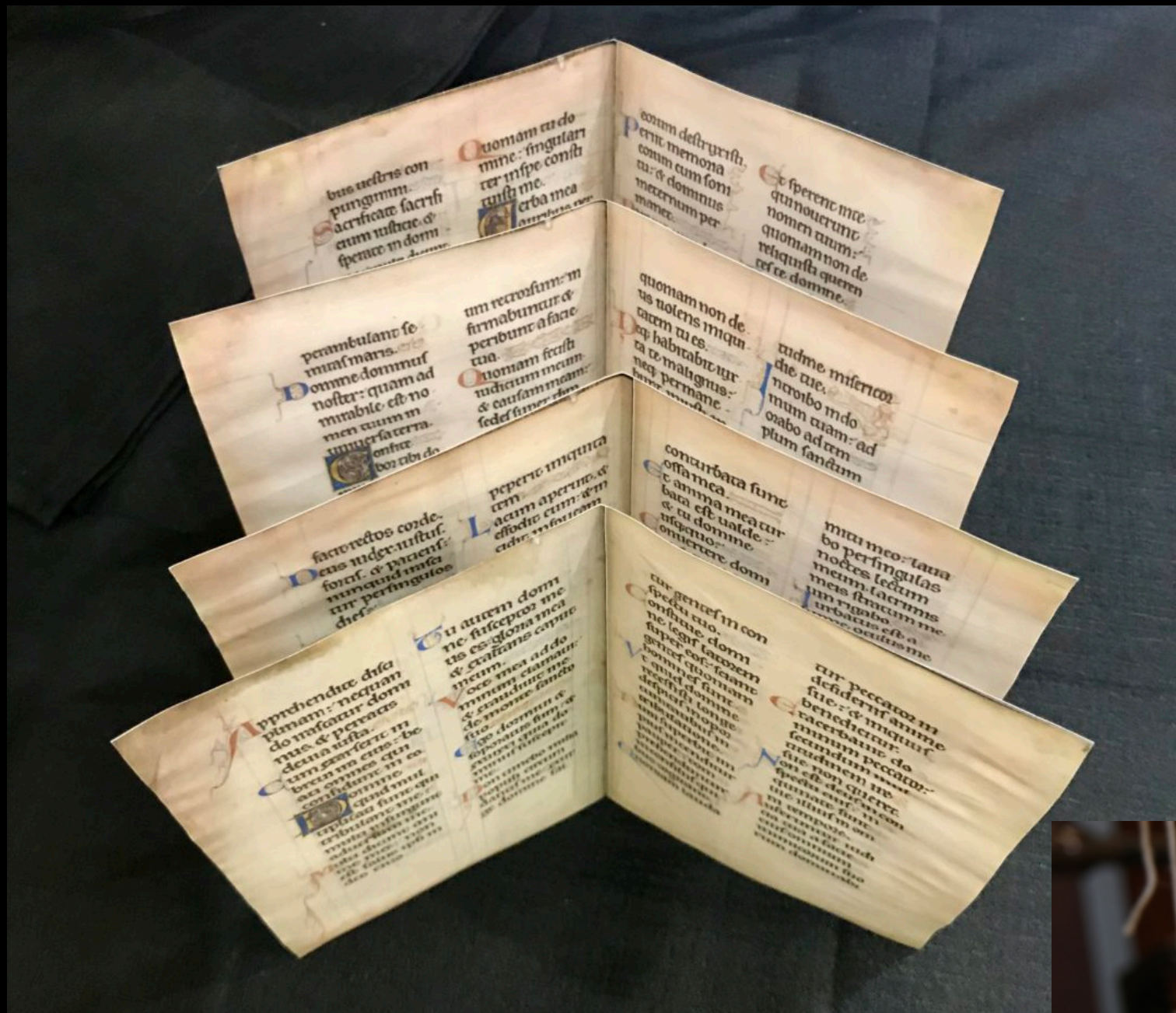




BP I ff.13-14

Fragment of a 3rd-century papyrus codex (Luke 11-13), Chester Beatty Museum





Left: four BIFOLIA make up one QUIRE (or GATHERING) typically of 8 leaves = 16 pages.

Right: the binding process. Quires are sewn through their own spines and then onto supporting cords.





# Transition from Roll to Codex

**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.

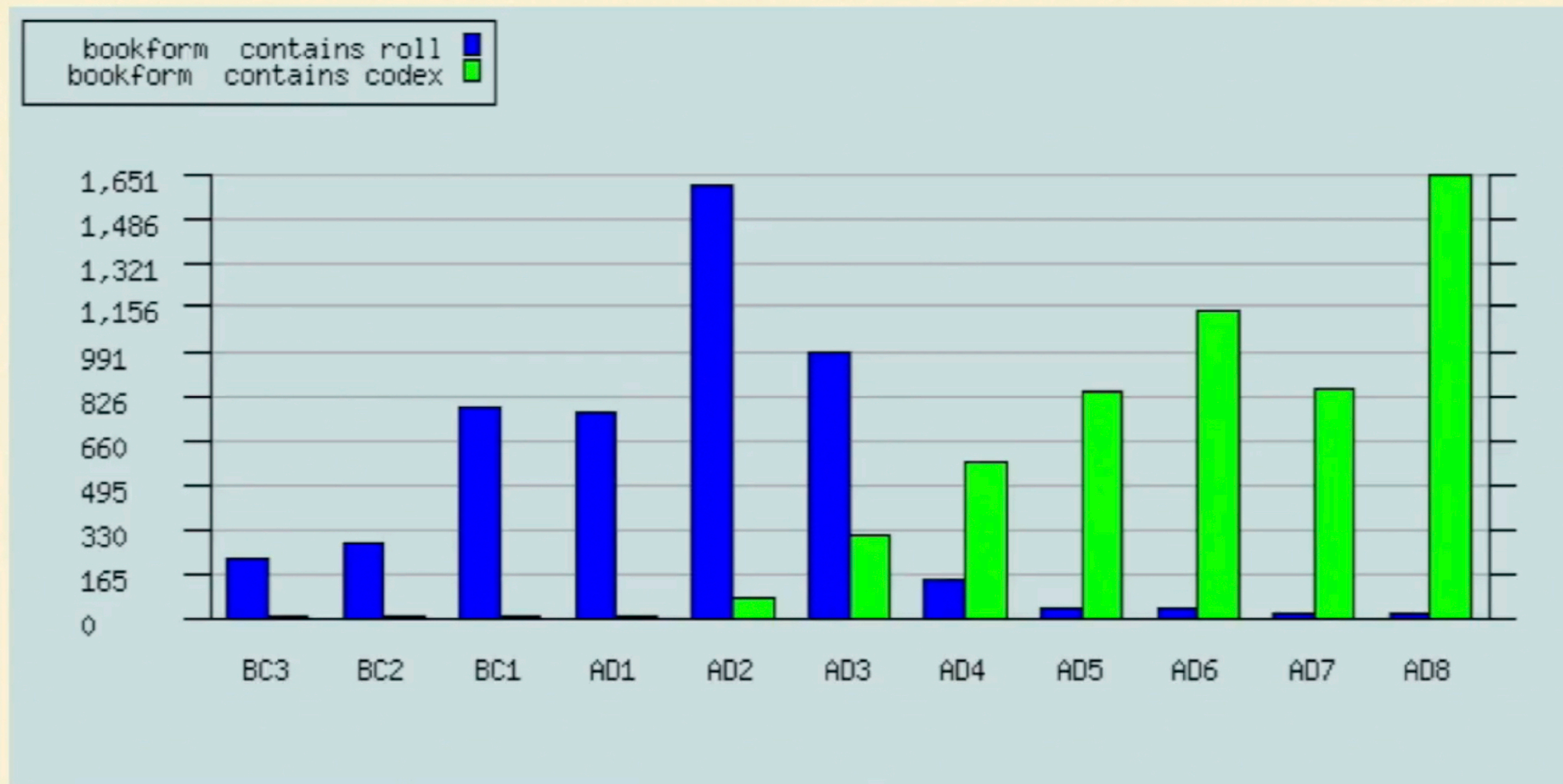
80% of surviving Christian books from late antiquity are in codex form.\*

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.



## Transition from Roll to Codex: Roll versus Codex by date

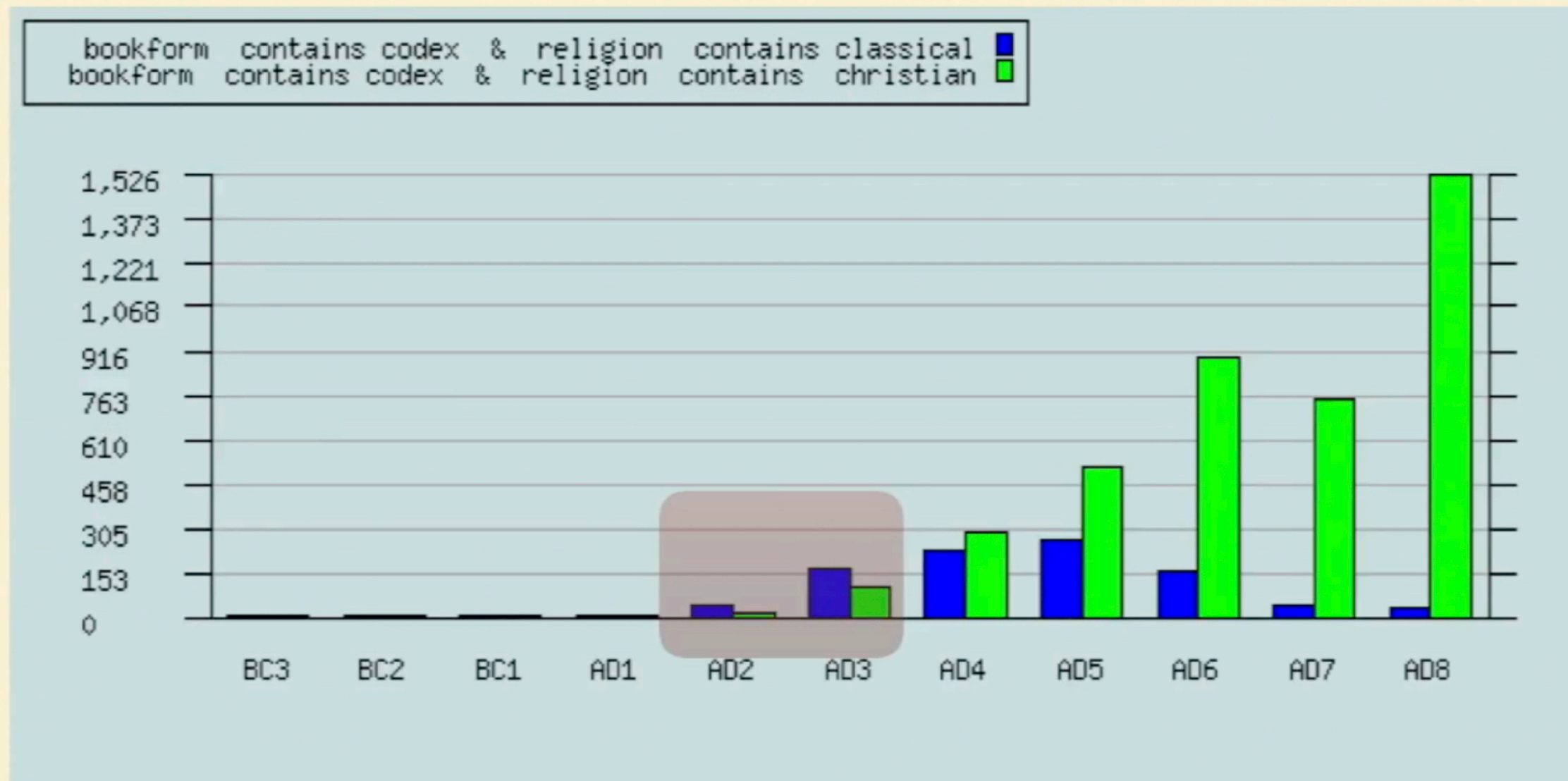


Source = Leuven Database of Ancient Books

(slide from a lecture by William Johnson)



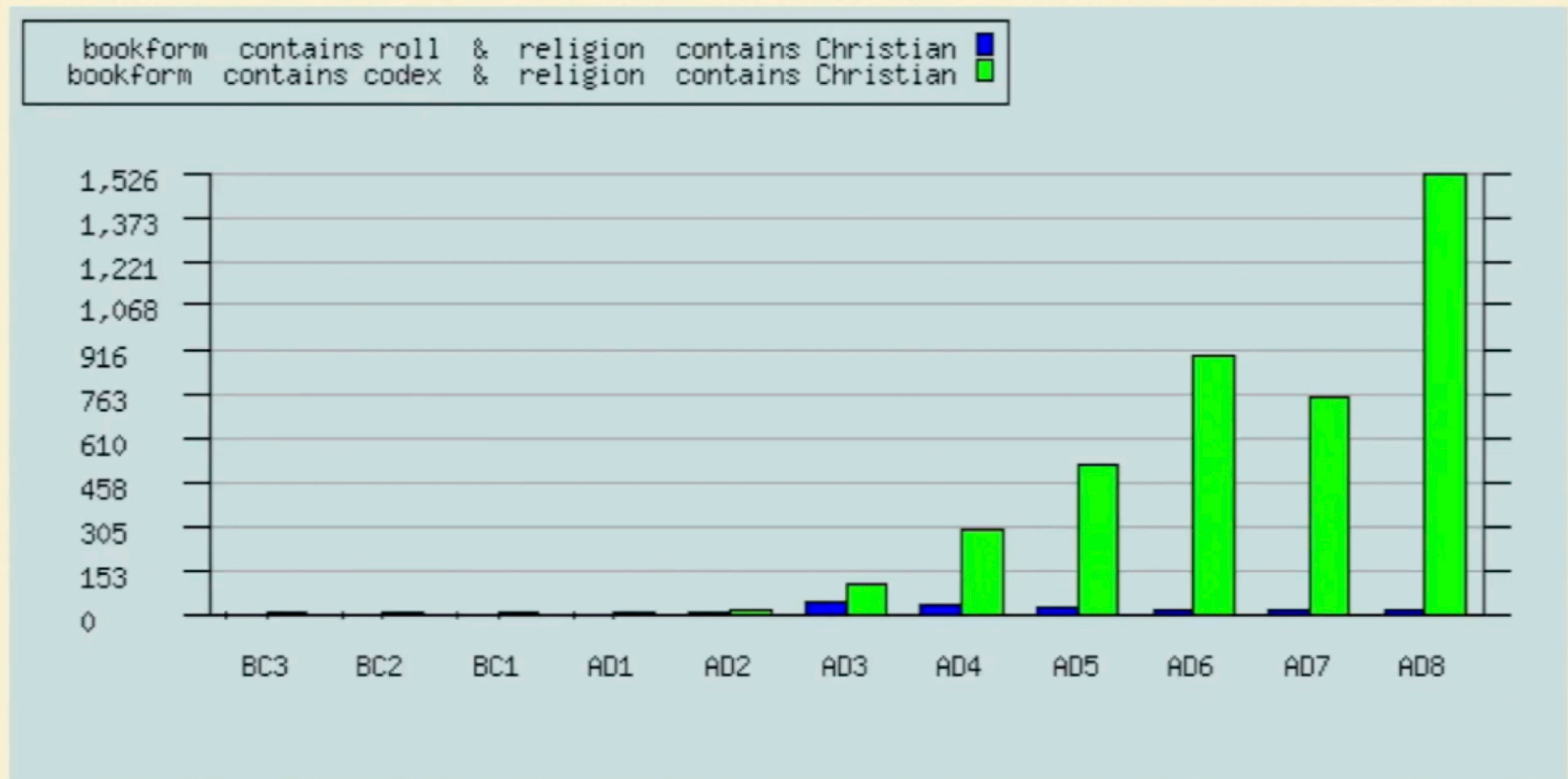
## The earliest codices - were they Christian? Codex - Classical versus Christian texts



Source = Leuven Database of Ancient Books



## The Christian preference for the Codex Roll versus Codex - Christian texts only



Source = Leuven Database of Ancient Books



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