

Research Article

Forum

As clear as Herculaneum mud: a plea for clarity

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Abstract

This article is by way of a request to experts who wish to make their expertise accessible to the non-expert. *Non omnia possumus omnes*, as Virgil said. In this case the deficiency is the lack of familiarity with papyrology and its conventions, in particular the papyri discovered in the library of the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum. The article shows how expertise can hinder rather than help the understanding of information needed for the processing of crucial data by the non-expert.

Keywords: Herculaneum, library, Philodemus, papyri, inventory of contents

Everyone knows what happened to Pompeii. Every classicist at least knows that a similar fate befell the smaller town of Herculaneum (now Erculano) within minutes of the same eruption. Much of Herculaneum, however, was engulfed by mud in addition to the other contents of the pyroclastic flow from Vesuvius.

The mud served as a kind of protective covering for parts of Herculaneum which would otherwise have been destroyed, as happened at Pompeii. One place in particular at Herculaneum is of special interest to classicists with an interest in papyrology or philosophy, an uncommon combination. This was a structure that is regarded as the only extant complete library from the ancient world. It was housed in one of the many lavishly provisioned villas that lined this part of the coast, a favourite location for the Roman rich, in this case (allegedly, but improbably) the father-in-law of Julius Caesar. Because of its library the villa is known as the Villa of the Papyri.

The villa is associated – the exact nature of the association is disputed – with an Epicurean philosopher called Philodemus. About half of the extant contents of the library, papyri in various states of preservation, are thought to have been authored by Philodemus himself (though probably not autographs). The existence of such a collection of papyri outside Egypt is highly unusual and is due in no small part to the mud.

Which brings me to the main point of this article, the contents of the collection of papyri. I begin with an outline summary of what is known of them.

In the year 2000 an inventory was made of the papyri by Marcello Gigante, which became a recognised source of reference. 1,850 papyri were recorded in the inventory. Of these about 350 are complete or almost complete. Nearly 1,000 are part rolls. About 500 are fragments only. Of the complete/almost complete and part rolls

a number have been completely or partially unrolled. Many remain to be unrolled or their content otherwise revealed, copied, deciphered, identified, attributed, edited and published. More were discovered than have survived, as many were destroyed in the process of excavation (and of conservation). More may be discovered, possibly in Latin, especially in lower levels of the villa.

The passage that now follows is intended to provide a more detailed and particularised account of the inventory. For a reader who is not familiar with papyrology it does no such thing, instead it muddies the picture.

‘*Size of the Collection*. Marcello Gigante’s catalogue of all the **papyri** from the Villa, published in 1979, listed 1,826 **items**; the total was later increased to 1,850 in two supplements. Many of these are not whole **papyrus rolls**, but **parts of rolls** or **fragments**, and it is clear that there were many fewer **rolls** in the collection than there are *PHerc entries* in Gigante’s catalogue. For example, several of the entries in our catalogue consist of two separate *PHerc* numbers (thus nos. 17, 28, 34, etc.), and one of the **manuscripts** of Metrodorus (no. 53) includes no fewer than five *PHerc* entries. Current estimates of the villa’s collection accordingly range from about 700 to “somewhere between 800 and 1,100 **books**.” Some 75 of Gigante’s 1,826 items can be positively identified from their *subscriptions*, and Philodemus is the author of 44, or 58 percent, of them. If we applied this percentage to the whole collection, we would have some 375 to 640 **volumes** by Philodemus, and 275 to 460 by authors other than Philodemus. The non-Philodemus collection was, then, a significant one, hundreds rather than just a few volumes, but it was not huge and it did not run into the thousands of volumes.’

The next paragraph begins (ironically, as we shall see) ‘This is useful information...’. It also contains the words ‘**works**’ and ‘**book-rolls**’.

This passage was written by George W. Houston and is taken from Chapter 11 (pp. 184–5) (‘The non-Philodemus book collection

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in the Villa of the Papyri') of *Ancient Libraries* (CUP, 2016). The bold formatting is mine, intended to draw attention to the number and variety of terms applied to the papyri.

The author is not a practising papyrologist, but he is very familiar with the work of papyrologists and relies on it in this chapter. Papyrologists themselves may have no difficulty in following the passage. But it was not written exclusively for papyrologists but for classicists in other fields, and part of the chapter is 'aimed primarily at scholars interested in library history'. As a classicist with an interest in books and writing in the ancient world, I must say that I have difficulty with the passage, and with parts of the chapter that relate to it.

My difficulty is caused by the words in bold. As the opening words of the passage indicate (the author's italics), the passage is concerned with 'The size of the collection' (actually, the word 'size' could be in bold too).

How many writings are we talking about? This is where the difficulty arises. It is partly because of the inherent difficulty of the task of decipherment, identification and attribution caused by the condition of the physical materials – a Herculean task. But it is also because of the number and variety of terms used by the author to denote the writings. Actually, 'writings' is one of the few words the author does not use. Things might have been clearer if he had.

Gathering together the words he does use, these are: papyri, items, papyrus rolls, parts of rolls, fragments, rolls, entries, manuscripts, books, volumes, works, book rolls, to which may be added 'texts', 'treatises' and 'materials' on p. 183. One suspects that some of these terms are synonyms; but one should not be in doubt about this. What we would like to know is the number of rolls, part rolls and fragments that have been discovered, and the number of separate texts (whole or partial) that have been reliably identified. Does the passage enable one to know this? I don't think so. Specifically:

- (a) What constitutes an 'item' or an 'entry'? Do the terms mean simply a member of a list? But a list of what exactly?
- (b) Is a 'roll' the same as a 'papyrus roll'? Are there other kinds of rolls? Are both the same as a 'book-roll'?

- (c) Is a 'book' the same as a book-roll? Is it a book that consists of a single roll rather than several rolls?
- (d) What is a 'volume' and how does the term relate to other terms used?
- (e) What is a 'work'? Is it a text or a book? A text and a book can span several rolls. Different parts of the same text may be found in different rolls. The same roll may contain several texts or parts of texts.
- (f) What are we to understand by a 'manuscript' and a 'volume' as distinct from other writings?

I hope that you can see now the nature and cause of the difficulty I have in understanding the data contained in the passage. The figures given, especially the global figures, actual or conjectured, are of no use to me unless I know what exactly they are figures of, specifically whether they refer to rolls/part rolls, books, or texts.

I do not envy the work of a papyrologist: fascinating though it may be, it must be both frustrating and rewarding – whether in equal measure I do not know. It may not be possible to give answers to what seem like the simplest of questions. For example, how many rolls have been discovered? It may not be possible to say with confidence whether fragments of rolls are parts of the same roll or different rolls. But nor do I envy the person who is unnecessarily thwarted in the attempt to make sense of the findings of papyrology. Is it too much to ask that scholars, when writing for scholars in other fields or for non-scholars, define and distinguish their terms, especially terms that are crucial to the correct understanding of the information presented? After all, scholars in all fields are now expected more often than not to provide translations for any Greek and Latin they include. (I did not find it necessary to translate the Latin in the Abstract, but if I should have done it means 'Not all of us can do everything'.)

(Apologies are due if the data needs to be updated, especially with regard to lower levels of the villa. Work on the villa and the library is an ongoing project, and papyrology (and archaeology) is not my field. I would not have written this article if it/they were.)